

Open Science Talk No. 44 (2022): Open Science – A French Perspective : a computer-generated transcript ¹

00:00:07 Per Pippin Aspaas

Open Science Talk, the podcast about open science. My name is Per Pippin Aspaas and I'm joined today by Pierre Mounier from France. So would you mind introducing yourself, Pierre? Who are you?

00:00:23 Pierre Mounier

Thank you, Per. So my name is Pierre Mounier, I work at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, which is a French research performing organisation specialized on social sciences. And I'm involved at management level in several infrastructures dedicated to open scholarly communication in humanities and social sciences, so I'm involved in OpenEdition, which is the French national infrastructure for this topic, but also in OPERAS – we are going to talk a little bit about it, I think, and also in the Directory of Open Access Books.

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Yes, so you've been in this open science movement, landscape for quite some years now. What is this OpenEdition? If we start off with that, how did that come about and what are your roles there, in this open science landscape more broadly?

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So I'm not the founder of OpenEdition, the former name of OpenEdition was revues.org, so you could translate it by journals.org if you like, and it was founded by Miranda Coss in 1999. So it's a very old organisation and it's really a community-driven initiative because at the start Mara was a PhD student working in an institution – at the University of Avignon – and he was asked by some journals in History to set up something to be disseminated online, and so to set up a website for those journals to be disseminated online. And that's where it started to build, what would become a shared infrastructure, not only for those two or three history journals, but for many more journals, by developing this infrastructure, which is named now OpenEdition. So it comes from the community itself, from the need of the researchers, the editors of the journals. And with the help of many other stakeholders, it grew organically from the community to become a national infrastructure but it took 20 years to arrive at this point and then get onboard other institutions – so the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales of course, the Marseilles university, the CNRS progressively joined the band to set up and to grow this infrastructure that would be useful for the world national community in the humanities and social sciences and to help the journals first transition towards the Open Access model. And then we extended the activity towards books. Now, we have a platform dedicated to academic blogs, to scientific events as well. So that's the history, let's say, of how revues.org would transform into OpenEdition and grew from the community itself. And so I'm not the founder, Mara is the founder of it. But very quickly from, let's say, the two first years I joined the band – let's say, as a volunteer first. And then I was more and more involved into the development of this activity.

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00:03:37 PPA

That's very interesting, to hear that the historians and other humanities scholars were actually asking for Open Access, or electronic publishing at least. And there are, sort of – the prejudices against the humanities that they are a little bit in the backwater here and they prefer print and so on, and hard copies if they can. Did you meet those kinds of attitudes, or was this more of a smooth process of bringing on board the various editors?

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It was not smooth at all. So, because of course, let's say, the scholar community is not homogeneous regarding Open Access. There are a lot of different opinions, different positions. So let's say that those initial journals were forerunners, they were pioneers in the movement. The interesting point was that their demand, if I remember well, was not to be Open Access – as you know, this label Open Access – what they wanted is to be online first, and to be more visible. And I say that because Open Access is not interesting for just the sake of being Open Access. Why do we need to be Open Access? Why is it interesting? And for the humanities – and that's what I strongly believe for the humanities and social sciences particularly – Open Access is not a threat, but an opportunity to be more used, more visible, more in the center of the landscape, rather than in a small corner where nobody is looking to, you know. And that was the initial will of those small, initial journals – to be just more visible. And then it was easy to tell them that Open Access is a way to be more visible for them. And then that's where you have more journals joining, more editors, more scholars joining, and being convinced of that. But others, of course, were all always reluctant and saying that, for example, they didn't want to be more visible on this garbage, which is the Internet, and they just wanted to have their print edition in the good book shops, you know, and in the good libraries where you have a selection of quality, and so on – and the internet was really for the teenagers and it was not for the scientists. So during the ten first years of the development of the activities we had this kind of debate within the scientific community that was hard sometimes, but always interesting.

00:06:20 PPA

How then, about the costs of covering for this? I guess you needed some sort of governmental or at least public funding somehow to build this service and to expand it to become like a national service for the humanities and social sciences research outputs.

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You know, recently we with ten organisations, we did a Pan-European survey about Diamond publishing models, so the name of it is the Open Access Diamond Journals Study. And we asked journal editors, publishers and other stakeholders about the business model of their Diamond journal. And we found in this study that the business model – or the economic model, I prefer to say that – of Diamond Publishing relies on different sources. So yes, there is public money, like public investment coming from the government. There is in kind contribution coming from the institutions who, for example, send personnel or put some of their personnel from the libraries, for example, at the disposal of the journals or the infrastructures or the University Press, for example. But there is also a lot of volunteering, so scholars themselves involved into editorial practise, into the development of Open Access publishing and so on. And that's exactly the story of OpenEdition, which started with the volunteering of a PhD student who was not supposed to do that, but he did that on his free time. And then progressively you had other funding and support resources that were brought and offered by supporting institutions. And then we had grants, for example governmental grants, but the problem of governmental grants is that they are limited in time, of course. So you have money to develop something and at the end of the project it's over. So we had to chase after more structural

funding and progressively the conjunction of all this kind of support funding through in-kind contributions coming from institutions and cash funding coming from the government – through projects funding or through structural funding – makes an economic model for the infrastructure and for the diamond publishing model. So one key point in this history was when we were qualified and recognised as a National Research Infrastructure.

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When was that?

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So it was – I don't remember exactly, but it was more than ten years ago, something like that. So, you know that in the European countries, they usually have a national road map to fund the development of research infrastructures and what they mean – usually, traditionally – by research infrastructures, is telescopes, colliders, a naval fleet to study the oceans and so on, but never scholarly communication infrastructures, because they were at that time not recognised as research infrastructure, but as something else, something different. And we fought a lot internally in France, to be recognised as a research infrastructure and to be on the national road map. Because when you are on the national road map, then you have access to more structural funding because you are one of those research infrastructures who are so essential for research to develop and to grow. So that was also a key point, or tipping point in our sustainability, I would say.

00:10:20 PPA

One question looking at France from the outside is that you also have a cultural politics of spreading the French language, or maintaining French as an important language internationally. I'll return to that. In Norway, we have no vision of Norwegian being important internationally, outside of Norway, but we still want to keep it as an academic language. All scientific terms should be possible to be expressed in Norwegian, for instance. That's good for teaching, good for disseminating research findings to the wider public. Here in Norway, it's usually the humanities and social sciences that live up to that ideal, because they still have their peer-reviewed journals even in Norwegian only – some important journals are Norwegian, and the government is then less reluctant to support those because they see the importance, they have no let's say commercial possibilities, because they can't go international in Norwegian. Is this kind of similar in France, this language politics, cultural politics of France? I would assume that many of the publications in OpenEdition are in French, and was that important on the political level or not?

00:11:46 PM

I would say not as much as in your country, because I think that researchers – maybe I will be killed by some researchers if I say that, but – I think that French researchers in humanities and social sciences, and particularly in the humanities, they don't have so much pressure to publish in English. There are some periods of time where there were attempts to really pressurize them to publish only in English, but the pushback was immediately very, very hard from the researchers. So there was one, two, three attempts but no more. And publishing in English for researchers – in French, sorry – for a researcher in the humanities, it's not too much of a problem, they don't have too much pressure to really switch to English. Maybe in some disciplines of social sciences of course, but really not so much in the humanities. So of course, the promotion of French language and the I don't know how to say that in English because it's a very French word: the *rayonnement* of the French language, the dissemination or the diffusion of the French language is an important factor and it's also an important factor for the support that has been given by the government to OpenEdition, for example, but this is not

completely a key factor, because once again, we didn't have the same pressure as the Scandinavian countries to publish in English. We don't have the same pressure.

00:13:36 PPA

Publishing is one thing, but there is also a national archive I noticed – a repository, I mean – in France. HAL. What does that stand for? And can you tell me a little bit about how that works?

00:13:49 PM

Yeah. So HAL started a long time ago as well. First it was created by the community of physicists in France, because they wanted to have a mirror of arXiv – that was the real origin of it. So they wanted to have a French mirror of arXiv, to be able to deposit their own articles in the mirror. And that seems strange, but that's the real origin of those who created HAL, and after that they got support from CNRS to grow this archive and this repository.

00:14:38 PPA

Sorry for stopping you there, because our listeners who don't know – CNRS, what is that.

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That CNS is Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique. This is one of the main research performing organisations – it's multidisciplinary – in France. So this is the largest research organisation in France.

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And they, sort of, help pool funding for things and they have resources to put into initiatives?

00:15:04 PM

Exactly. They have a scientific information department and they have funding to develop scientific information tools and platforms for their own community of researchers – but for the whole country as well, because as it is the largest research organisation in France, it has a structuring role at the level of the country. So they had this initiative coming from the physicist who wanted to have their French mirror of arXiv. And then there were some funding to develop this repository, not only for the physicists, but for, progressively, all disciplines. And that's where after some time, other institutions and the government went in to provide more support and to provide collective funding, basically to support this thing, this repository that became a national repository and, indeed, a national infrastructure as well.

00:16:07 PPA

So it's no longer for physics?

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Not only, no. And the interesting thing is that the researchers in humanities and social sciences jumped in quite quickly after the physicists, so there was quite quickly a sub-part of HAL which was named HAL-SHS – HAL for the social sciences and humanities – where we started to have researchers self-depositing their preprints or their chapters of books, in the repository.

00:16:46 PPA

How then about research data? As far as I can tell now, it's very much infrastructure-based thinking. I mean, if you want to promote open science in France, you build infrastructures, it seems, from what you've said so far. But research data sets – how are they managed?

00:17:08 PM

So it's true that we could say that the open science, the French Open science policy, is pretty much infrastructure-driven. So, you know, we think immediately in terms of infrastructure. OK, we have a policy, what infrastructure that exists or not exists, that we want to develop? And for the research data sets it's quite the same. So for a long time there was, let's say, regional or more institutional development of research data repositories from different universities – some are using Dataverse for example, others are developing their own repository with different softwares and so on – and very recently, there was the promotion of, let's say, a national, federate – so that's interesting, because it's not a centralised infrastructure at this time, it's a federated infrastructure. So there was the setup and the promotion of a federated national infrastructure for research data repositories. So the idea – I'm not a specialist of this domain – but the idea is that you have a federation between the existing institutional repositories, and there is a national one which plays the role of a fall-back system or a catch-all system for those researchers or communities who don't have any repository where they can share their data at institutional level, and then they can use the national one and it's all federated together. The other point is that we have also disciplinary-based research infrastructures. So for the humanities for example, we have Huma-Num. So Huma-Num is the national research infrastructure dedicated to digital humanities – humanities with digital tools and methods. And they developed and set up a repository named NAKALA, where the researchers in humanities, they can deposit as well their data sets, their sources, and they can expose them with standardized metadata, to give them more visibility. And of course, it ensures preservation of the data set and so on.

00:19:33 PPA

We mentioned politics earlier. I have a tricky question for you towards the end. We all know that within the universities and the public institutions – we have our agenda, we have our needs and visions for how things should move forward. But you also have other actors that can claim they have the same vision, but perhaps they don't. Perhaps they have something else that has to drive them because they are commercial, so they actually need to gain some money. And sometimes this can be a nice alignment between those two interests for sure, but some other times there are conflicts. I've noticed, for instance, that in France these so-called transformative deals have not been very well received, and I've also heard people from governmental level saying that this is not the way forward. But there are lobbyists, and there are different interests. How does this work? Are you confident that France as a whole is moving in the open science direction, or is there friction, and can there be sudden changes?

00:20:46 PM

So the situation on this topic is really different between different disciplines. So just to sum it up, there are big differences between STM disciplines – science, technology and medicine disciplines – and SSH disciplines. Because for the STM disciplines – in terms of lobbying, yes, there is lobbying at highest level from, let's say, big commercial publishers to obtain a certain number of things, to drive the policy in certain directions. That's the normal game, I would say. But what is true is that in France – recently, in fact, it was two or three years ago – we set up what we call the COSO. An the COSO is the Comité pour la Science Ouverte, it's a national committee coordinated by the French Ministry of Research, that gathers all the stakeholders involved in a way or another in open science. So you have all the institutions represented, you have the libraries – you have Couperin, which is the National Consortium of Libraries – you have the research institutions, you have the universities, you have the university presses, you have everyone in this COSO, who work through different working groups etcetera. And that's very important, because it creates a kind of community. And when you are a community, then it's much more difficult for lobbyists to have separate discussions and to make

pressure on certain stakeholders in private conversations, you know, because when you create a community, you have a public forum where information is shared. And then it prepares the ground for collective discussion and collective action for the common good. So I'm really interested by this COSO development – the development of this National Committee for Open Science as a community at national level – because I think it gives a lot of strength to the scholarly community to make collective decisions in accordance with the ministry itself, and to push back a little bit the, let's say, the specific interest that would want to take advantage of what's going on. So that's for the STM. For the SSH, the situation is a little bit different, because we have a number of publishers – some of them are public university presses, but – we have a number of private, for-profit commercial publishers in France who are publishing research outputs and so books and journals – in French, mostly, and who are useful in the landscape. So here, my interpretation, my position – that's really a personal opinion about that – is that their aim, their objective is not to make profits, it's not to maximise their profits, but they are anxious about the development of open science policies because they are anxious that it will destroy their business model or their economic model. Right? So it's not the same. They don't want to maximise their profit, they just want to preserve their economic model and continue their operation and continue to work. So what is difficult – but what is interesting – is that we have to find solutions for them as well, so that the development of Open Access and open science policies in fact, once again, can be an opportunity for them and not a threat to their economic model. And that's difficult, because when you have people who are under pressure – under what they consider as a threat – it's very difficult to have, let's say, a free conversation with them and to explore with them. So that's where sometimes in the French context we have, let's say, hard positions which are taken by some actors, because they feel threatened, but they shouldn't. That's what we need to work on, and that's a very specific to the SSH situation, because those publishers, commercial publishers – they are very small, in fact, they have a small team and they are small organisations, small companies – so they are fragile in a sense.

00:25:43 PPA

Yeah, this has been hugely interesting, Pierre. Is there anything else about French open science that you would like to add towards the end of this episode?

00:25:55 PM

Maybe my final word will be to say that sometimes we, the French, we don't share enough and we don't engage enough in conversations with our colleagues and our other communities in other countries – such as in Norway, for example. So this is a tendency in France, not to reach out enough and to consider ourselves in a more European or international context, trying to learn from others, but also to share what we are doing, and to share information about what we are doing. So I think this is important, that we work on this and that's why I really thank you for this podcast, because you give me the opportunity to share information about what's going on in my country – as I'm learning what's going on in your country when I participated in the Munin conference, for example, and when discussing with you. So we should continue. Thank you very much.

00:26:52 PPA

Thank you so much for coming to the podcast, Pierre. Open Science Talk is produced by the University Library at UiT the Arctic University of Norway. Thanks for listening.