

Open Science Talk No. 57 (2024): KOALA : a computer-generated transcript ¹

00:00:09 Per Pippin Aspaas

Open Science Talk, the podcast about open science. My name is Per Pippin Aspaas. Today my guest is Marco Tullney from the Technische Informationsbibliothek in Hanover in Germany, a founding father of something called KOALA. We'll get to that in a second. But first of all, welcome to the podcast, Marco.

00:00:34 Marco Tullney

Thanks for having me, Per.

00:00:37 PPA

So who are you, Marco? And what is your day job?

00:00:42 MT

OK, so I am, as you said, based in Hanover, Germany, where I'm heading a group called Publishing Services at Technische Informationsbibliothek, which is – like, the Leibniz Centre for Science and Technology, it is a very large academic library covering sciences and technology, and also research, performing organisation, doing lots of research in in topics surrounding the library. We have a very strong emphasis on open infrastructure, which is also connected to what we're talking about today. My job includes heading a team of Open Access librarians that have a very wide range of tasks, from Open Access repositories to operating a library publisher to – I don't know, organising collective Open Access funding, like what we're talking about today. And I'm also coordinating the Open Access and Open Science activities at TIB, which is our acronym – and yeah, that's a very interesting and rewarding job.

00:01:52 PPA

Yes. And we'll talk today primarily about something called KOALA – *Konsortiale Open Access Lösungen Aufbauen* – pardon my German. We could translate it into English as Establishing Consortial Open Access Solutions. So that is KOALA, establishing consortial open access solutions. So in a nutshell, what does this imply and where did it all start?

00:02:21 MT

It started a few years back, we had already thought about doing something like that and put it together when a funding opportunity came up. So we wanted to build on TIB's extensive experience with organising national or other consortia for joint access to scholarly works. So this is something that the library has been doing since forever – and in the German context we refer to consortia as groups of participants that are put together for one specific purpose. It's not a consortium as, like, a standing organisation, but it is, like, ad hoc contracts or groups put together for – I don't know, accessing Springer journals. So this is what we have been doing. And we wanted to build on this experience and on this standing in the community and and the trust that we have earned by doing this in the traditional publishing world and move this closer to Open Access. Of course, we had

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already introduced Open Access into this area, which is also a task that is not my primary responsibility – we have another team that is organising that and we do KOALA together. So we had Open Access clauses, transformative agreements – we did all these kinds of things but then we wanted to do something more focused on Diamond Open Access. So this is where KOALA is positioned. We wanted to have no transition period, no APCs, no barriers for readers or authors – just covering the operating costs of journals – and in the beginning, book series – to make sure that no one else has to pay for that and to give, like, a three-year – which is the the period that we're operating with – a three-year guarantee for journals to have their costs covered. The complete funding of these operating costs of journals for a number of years. And when we put this idea together, we successfully applied for federal funding in Germany – so we got a project funded together with our partner, the University of Konstanz in Southern Germany. And during this project we worked on a model – how could how could this work, like, all the different details: when will we ask for money? Who will we ask for money? Who can contribute? That we can talk about in more detail later, maybe. But we got two first agreements started with journals and book series. And now, after that, we continued doing this. We are right now carrying out a follow up project, again with funding by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research, but also with the partner in Konstanz, where we try to spread out this model to other organisations, meaning we do not think that KOALA is something that that we want to do exclusively, but we want this idea to spread, we want other libraries to do something similar – especially libraries that are in a similar position of organising this kind of collective funding agreements – and we also we also have developed this into a service. It's no longer a project. We are doing this as as a large library in Germany. We have started another agreement for another group of journals and we will open a new pledging round for two new agreements later this year where we hope to get additional participants.

00:06:20 PPA

OK, so you mentioned Diamond Open Access, so that's at the heart of KOALA. It's not for any other – or any journal, it's for those non commercial Diamond Open Access journals and book series. Is that correct?

00:06:40 MT

It is about Diamond Open Access. But as we all know, that is a very vague and loosely defined term. So at the very essence, it means for us in this context – it means no APCs. So we have other requirements. But when it comes to the Open Access model, we do not exclude commercial publishers. We do not require these journals to be scholar-led, which is, like, the other criterion that people often see as one aspect of Diamond Open Access – which is important, but we do not require the journals to to operate that way. When we look at what we have included in our programme so far, most of the journals fall into this more narrow definition of Diamond Open Access, with them being scholar-led and and independent, like with a group or, like, some kind of non-profit association responsible for the journal and owning the journal. But we also have one or two journals from commercial publishers that fulfil all of our requirements and do not charge anything beyond what KOALA is paying them.

00:07:59 PPA

Yes. So how many journals have actually received funding from KOALA by now?

00:08:08 MT

So we – in the beginning, we had two smaller book series and we had four journals, and the year after that we had six journals. So ten journals and two book series so far, with another round starting this year.

00:08:25 PPA

Yeah, but some of those journals, they publish quite a lot, it seems. I mean, I say quite a lot – it depends on who you compare with, of course. But these are – some of them are, I guess, important journals in their fields. Is that what you also use as a requirement or is that something that is not so important when you evaluate those that apply for funding from KOALA?

00:08:48 MT

The journals differ in size. They maybe also differ in the impact that they have. We expect the journals to be of high quality. We have a whole set of criteria that can be downloaded from our homepage, but it is – in the end, it's not our decision. We make this basic check and we see that we think it's a sound calculation, it's worth the money and it's not totally unrealistic to propose this to potential participants – like, library participants – that offer some of their money for these journals. But then in the end, we put it to that kind of vote. So we propose something, we ask libraries to pledge their support, and if they do, obviously it was a good enough – like, price–performance ratio. But if we do not manage to get that money then that is OK too because this is what our task is. We can put something together, we can offer to manage this kind of agreement, but it can only start if enough libraries participate in it. So – I think, that being said, this task of organising this – getting signatures of dozens of libraries, making sure that all the requirements are met – this is not something I would probably not do for journals of a very small size and very low operating costs, because then there would be a mismatch between the kind of work we had to invest – like, many people would have to invest – and the outcome. I think, if you operate your journal with, I don't know, €2000 a year you probably find a better and an easier way to get that funding.

00:11:04 PPA

Yeah. So you say that libraries need to join. It's similar as if a major commercial publisher offers a bundle of journals saying that: every institution in this consortium will have access if you pay this or that money. And then you can pull resources together and perhaps get a discount when making negotiations with the commercial publisher for this bundle of journals. But for this non-commercial or time and Open Access rig, how do you go about? Do you use the same network within the German library sector or do you need to speak to other people? I mean, is this the same funds that you need to get the funding from, or how does it work? Does it differ from institution to institution perhaps? Or is it generally the same, exactly the same, library budget?

00:12:02 MT

Generally it is the same and this is what we want, and what I think is the best way to go about it. Actually, I have some concerns when so many of the Diamond Open Access discussions that we have right now – in the last years – operate under the idea that somehow, by magic, we will find additional millions to fund Diamond Open Access. There are many ideas floating around – you know, the government, funders – someone should put additional money into the system to safeguard diamond Open Access publishing. I think this is not very realistic, and I also think it's not good. I think when we move closer to Open Access as, like, the standard and closer to Diamond Open Access as one of the Better models in this Open Access world, we need to make sure that this transformation, or transition, that is happening also includes library budgets. We cannot just assume that that the library budget will still be there for subscriptions and paying commercial publishers – and that we do not have to cut into that. We need to do that, and we also need to send the message that the library budget is there for the best – the optimal – access to scholarly knowledge that libraries can guarantee with that kind of money. And we have subject specialists, we have university librarians, we have all these people in roles that have to make the decisions – on a daily basis – where to put this budget, like: do we sign with that publisher or that we do not have the money for both? And I think that

Diamond Open Access funding – including these, these KOALA consortia – should be part of that discussion and that decision, which has some implications – we have to perform on the same level, obviously. We cannot – and I think this is very important – this is not about donations, this is not about, you know, our goodwill. We do not ask for anything – for, like, leftover money at the end of the year. But we have to ask for money where we compete with other publishing activities, other business models. So this means that the organisations participating in KOALA are – I think, almost all of them – are academic libraries. We left the door open for other organisations to join, but in the end it's libraries. Libraries participate, libraries pay out of their library budget, and most of them are from Germany, which is also a result of us using – because you asked about that – using the exact same networks that we already have, which was like a starting point for this – because we have these networks, because we are a trusted managing organisation for these kinds of agreements – and we expanded that into the Diamond Open Access world. And we also need to think about where we can move from there, because in some cases it might be good to also be able to talk to researchers, especially when you have, like, society journals that are very closely aligned with a narrow field – so maybe you also need to address these groups that maybe have additional money. But the most important budget is going to stay the library budget, I think. But one important challenge is: where do we go from there, how do we move this to an international level? Because, obviously, we will reach some barriers when we try to get this money only from German libraries.

00:16:37 PPA

Yeah, we'll expand the geographical scope in a second. But first I just need to – you mentioned the researchers and the research organisations. If you look from the editors' perspective – I mean, if people, scholars, have a journal, they have had it for many years, perhaps it's published by a commercial publisher. And then we ask them: would you consider going to an institutional publisher, for instance, a publishing platform? And they say: well, if we do that we will not have the small money that we need to have editorial board meetings and some technical help that the publishers in the end actually do quite well for them – like, layout help and so on. So do you have examples of that – like, persuading journals that are with a commercial publisher, journals that are with a commercial publisher, persuading them to go another route to become Diamond? Or is it more like you give funding specifically for them to change their model – from subscription or APC – to Diamond?

00:17:51 MT

We do not have an example in our current setup of a journal that has moved away from a commercial publisher because of KOALA. We have we have a journal that is still with their commercial publisher, and this journal now is Open Access and this is without any APCs. Most of our journals already have been Diamond Open Access journals, and now they have a better a more stable financial situation for the next years. This is something that we did not necessarily expect when we started the project. We thought there would be more flipping of journals – like, towards Open Access, or towards Diamond Open Access – involved. But I think the questions that you have to answer when you, or the processes that you need to go through when you do this are quite a lot. And you have to make sure that that you make everything right, starting from – like, the obvious: who owns this title and can we just walk away, or do we have to start from scratch – and there are many, many situations like this in the last years where editors have walked out of their contracts and have started a new. But in most cases that also meant losing the title. But we can look at the different requirements that these journals have and we can try to offer solutions for all of these needs. As I said in the introduction, we are also operating a Diamond Open Access publisher – a library publisher – at TIB. So we can offer journals a new home. We advise editors, we advise researchers – we can help them with many of the questions that they might have and whatever they end up with, when they want to leave their

current publisher, they are going to need financial support and this is where where KOALA can play a role and many other models can play a role. And they do not necessarily have to be from the same source. And I think that what we see right now in many cases is that you have you find an institutional home – maybe the University of your editor-in-chief – and they offer to host your journal. And that is fine for smaller journals, but also there might be changes in the future – the editor-in-chief retires, the university then kicks you out, you have to find a new home. Now your new publisher suddenly wants to see money for the services that they provide. So, I think it maybe are – probably, it helps to to think of these these services as independent services that can be operated or can be offered by different organisations. And then we have, I think, most of the areas where editors will need support covered, and I think it's good if we can cover all these in our library, but there are many organisations that maybe can do one of these things, but this thing they can do very good. And that's fine too, because we need this – this open and decentralised, but connected – infrastructure landscape where we can do most of the things that commercial publishers offer on our own.

00:21:58 PPA

The outcome then, so far, is that you have primarily spent KOALA money on strengthening existing Diamond Open Access journals and book series and not so much flipping from a commercial model to a non-commercial model. Is that correct?

00:22:20 MT

Right. Yeah.

00:22:22 PPA

How would you see the future? You mentioned that you would like to expand beyond Germany and to perhaps have more partners elsewhere. Another thing that might happen in a multilingual area, as as the European area, is to have more regional setups. Like, there are some funding streams – in Sweden and in Norway, for instance – for Diamond Open Access. They are set up a little bit differently in the various countries, but what if we made like a a Nordic KOALA – the Nordic KOALA solution, where we have – like in Germany, where you have different *Bundesländer*, different contexts for each library – each academic institution is set in a different German state. So you could have – similarly, in in the Nordic region, you have journals that are perhaps operating with the editors from several Nordic countries. They are Nordic journals with, but how to fund them? Do you have any advice, cutting through these different national contexts and setting up a a common consortial solution?

00:23:46 MT

So first, I would be very excited about something like that happening. I think it's really necessary that we that we do things similar to this or depending on on your needs and your situation different, but with the same goal of Diamond Open Access funding. We need these in all the different areas and we need to cooperate. And I think part of the advice that I would have is – I think it's important, wherever that is possible, to build upon existing infrastructure. As I said this, this is – how we started is: you already know us from services X&Y and now we try to expand this in a very similar environment and we can use the context as a starting point. And I think it's also important to frame such an endeavour as as a transformative one from the beginning. This is not about – as I said before, this is not about finding additional money because you have to acknowledge that library budgets are limited at some point and you have to frame this, I think, as one means to transform these budgets and to move more money into Open Access and away from non-Open Access models. And so especially in the beginning, I think it will help to have a focus on content that already has a strong foothold in your region. This is what we did with with KOALA too. So in the first round – in the first first year – these were German journals with a very high name recognition in Germany, with many of

the authors coming from Germany, with many of the readers coming from Germany, with the journals publishing in German or in English. And that helped because you have – you can make the case easier and more successfully to convince the library that this is – that funding this and safeguarding the existence of these journals – is in the interest of their community, because it's their obligation to provide their community – their university, their discipline – with important content. So if you have that foothold and if you're not asking for: could you maybe fund this, I don't know, Australian journal that no German author has ever written in, that would be more difficult. So build on existing organisations, maybe focus on Nordic publications, at least in the beginning. And also, once you gather that money, and once you negotiate with journals about providing them with the means to publish their journal for a few years – this also gives you some power. Because this is obviously a very good outcome for the journals, and I think it's not necessary to shy away from using this power to help journals, like, bring on improvements, for instance, by requiring journals to follow best practises in publishing in Open Access. Because if you – especially when you have journals that move away from commercial publishers or if you have journals that are very small, do not need much money, have operated with, you know, little money in the last years, maybe they haven't implemented all that we expect from journals. But now that you're negotiating with them, now you also have to argue that these journals have to be in a good position when you then try to make the case for their funding with many libraries. So implementing a few improvements according to a minimal set of requirements like we do might be a good thing for everyone involved in these situations. And the last thing I can think of as an advice is to make sure that you have a very clear definition of the roles and responsibilities of each party in these agreements. Because even if we can think of this like we have a Diamond Open Access community, maybe – that is comprising publishers and libraries and organisations like KOALA – still, each of these players has a different set of interests. The journal maybe wants to get more money out of this, the libraries want to pay less. And maybe even a few more, and it helps if everyone knows what their obligations are and what is expected of them to make this happen. It might also help, in a few years when something is not performing so well, and if you then maybe want to discontinue the involvement of, maybe, one journal. So these are things that that I think would be – so this is my advice, but every situation in every country might be different. So I do not know enough about your situation. But, as I said, I would be very excited about spreading this idea into other countries.

00:29:56 PPA

Thank you very much for that. So there is a lot in it for the academic sector, as I see it. I mean, you can reduce costs, cut costs, you can give more power to the academic community, take power back from from commercial entities that perhaps don't have the same interests as the academic community at large, including the libraries. I mean, the scholars and the libraries together may have other interests than a commercial publisher, obviously. But if we see this from the editors' perspective, strictly: what's in it for them? I mean, it's three years with funding – you're guaranteed for three years – but then perhaps next round, you need to apply make the same process all over again? Or is it more like a pro forma activity after three years that you – OK, you just fill in the same form as last time and then you can rely on KOALA to survive for another three years?

00:31:00 MT

Probably it's going to be the same form, but maybe there are, like, additional requirements because you know, standards evolve. But generally it's going to be the same, but I think the process is going to look a lot like the initial onboarding. So we will assess the situation ourselves: are we interested in continuing this? And then we have to gather enough support from libraries to continue this agreement and the three-year period comes from the acknowledgement that we will not get libraries

to pledge their support for a longer period. This is because the libraries have to manage their budgets, they do not know what will happen in the next three years. Maybe there are other national obligations, maybe their budget is going to be reduced by the university, or by other factors, and they cannot promise to continue their support, like, indefinitely or for the next ten years. So this is our attempt to find like the sweet spot between, like, one year and forever. And it is, even if this maybe is a little harsh – or maybe maybe we, myself included, do not like this idea of ever increasing evaluation and performance reviews – but it is going to be an opportunity, with a good or bad outcome, for everyone to look at what has happened in the last three years and if this is still where the library wants to invest their money. And I think that the same is true for all of the other obligations of libraries. If we subscribe to, like, traditional non-Open Access content, we also have to evaluate after a few years if we want to enter a new agreement. And I think this is maybe not the ideal situation that editors would like to see – like: can you just give us money forever, no questions asked? But it's also not really bad. I think the three-year period should be OK. I think there are more – I'm not sure if that is smart to say, but there are a few risks that a model like this increases compared to other Open Access models. We do not like the APC model because it's expensive because it excludes some authors because it's a pain for libraries to manage, or to handle, individual APCs. But it's very efficient – like, from a publisher's perspective, it's very efficient. You always know that you will get paid for what you do. You know that libraries and authors have accepted this model. And you do not have to fear a change in, like, your output. With KOALA we agree on – we have an estimate of – the number of articles that this journal publishes and we put down a number, an amount of money that this journal gets each year for their work. If they have a sudden increase in submissions and now have, like, twice as many submissions, then maybe their costs increase and they run into problems and we need to, maybe, renegotiate. So this is something where maybe the APC model outperforms our approach. We have other advantages. So I think it's still a good thing to do. But I also have to acknowledge that maybe if you have a high profile journal, or maybe a a journal publishing a lot with also, maybe, a topic where it's possible that you have a huge increase or decrease in the number of submissions from year to year – that we might need to find additional clauses in our contracts or solutions to these problems. But in the end, looking from the editors' perspective, you have this three-year period where at least you know what kind of support you can expect in the next three years – you know about your obligations, you know that you're part of a community where no one is expecting you to make any profit. We have heard about so many cases where editors have been, like, enraged by their publishers telling them to increase their output so that the publisher makes more money – this is not going to happen in these cases and this is a good thing. I think this is the most important thing. Everything else – you get to be a part of the Diamond Open Access community and so on – that is interesting, but it's not at the core. The core is: you have – at least for the three years – you have a very secure funding situation.

00:36:54 PPA

Marco Tullney, do you have anything else that you would like to add towards the end of this podcast?

00:37:02 MT

Of course I have! I think many of the things that we have discussed also point to one interesting question and that is: do we want the Diamond Open Access model to expand and to scale up? Or do we want it to be the model of, like, a niche of a small number of journals? Because if we want Diamond Open Access to succeed – if we want to access library budgets, if we want libraries to shift their money from traditional publishing to Open Access and then on to Diamond Open Access publishing – because it is cheaper, because it is fairer, because it serves the scholarly communities better – then we should try to expand. And to do this, we cannot just demand, like: give us additional

money. We have to deliver, we have to deliver high quality. We have to deliver – we have to attract authors, we have to prove that this is not a hobby but serious publishing. Because in the end it's authors that decide where where to submit and which journals to support by submitting their content there. And this requires transparency, this requires honesty about with some of the downfalls maybe, or the risks, it requires professionalism on a technical and administrative level. And I think that the key criterion that will decide a lot of things is if we manage to come up with efficient workflows. And there's some work left for us to do as well. Because if Diamond Open Access funding is more trouble than handling subscriptions or APCs, it will not succeed. If Library publishing is more expensive than contracting or being part of a commercial publisher, then it will not succeed. So we have some of the tools, but we also need to further learn, to further invest, to further improve and innovate our processes, and we cannot rest on the fact that we have now, like, minimal financial support for some of the existing smaller journals. I mean, we could, but then we would depend on donations and, like, as I said, the leftover budgets, but we will not be able to compete for, like, larger parts of library budgets or funding, and that money will still continue to go into other models. But these questions maybe have to wait for another podcast episode. But this, I think, is very interesting. I do not know how this will turn out, but I think it would be interesting to at least have the ambition to move Diamond Open Access out of this niche of existing smaller journals, mostly in the humanities, to a more, like, universal approach to scholarly publishing.

00:40:16 PPA

Marco Tullney, it has been a pleasure to have you on the podcast. Thank you so much.

00:40:21 MT

Thanks for the invitation.

00:40:25 PPA

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