A brief saga about open access books

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Abstract

Monographs and academic books are increasingly becoming a focus point in the open access debate and policy developments. This article gives a personal account of the rationale behind open access book publishing and open infrastructures for books. It elaborates on the need for collaboration between the actors in the community in order to sustain open access book publishing to the benefit of the scholarly community and the public at large.

Keywords

Open access, monographs, Humanities, Social Sciences, academic books, research libraries, research funders, open infrastructures

When I recently was appointed director of the OAPEN Foundation it felt a bit like coming home, returning to the landscape of scholarly monographs and open access. I was professionally raised in that setting at Museum Tusculanum Press[1], University of Copenhagen in the beginning of the millennium. The press was a classical university press, publishing high quality monographs that sold rather poorly but nevertheless attracting authors from around the world. As I shall unfold below, we surprised ourselves to some extent when we in 2008 entered the hitherto uncharted territories of open access book publishing. This happened when we together with five other European university presses founded the OAPEN project. The project ended in 2010 and turned into a Dutch foundation directed

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[1] The name *Museum Tusculanum Press* is taken from the Classical Graeco-Roman period. *Museum* is the latinised form of Greek μουσεῖον, derived from μοῦσα 'muse' and referring originally to a place where the nine muses of the arts, cultures and sciences were gathered. *Tusculanum* is an adjective derived from the place name *Tusculum*, a town in Latium on the cooler western edges of the Alban Hills southeast of the heat of pulsating Rome, where the statesman, orator, writer and philosopher Marcus Tullius Cicero had a summer villa in the first century BCE, and where he wrote many of his works which would go on to have such profound impact on European thinking. Source: https://www.mtp.dk/about.asp

by Eelco Ferwerda who has now retired (yet is still active in the community). Continuing his great work was a mission I very happily accepted.

OAPEN – an open infrastructure for peer reviewed books

So what is OAPEN? A few things actually. It is a not-for-profit foundation based in the Netherlands (at the national library (KB) in The Hague). It is run by a team of three full-time and two part-time staff members and a board. Financially, the foundation is sustained through contributions from research libraries, research funders and scholarly publishers. For contributing institutions OAPEN offers a suite of services in the areas of discoverability, hosting, deposit, quality assurance, dissemination, and digital preservation.

The acronym 'OAPEN' (Open Access Publishing in European Networks) suggests that it is a European endeavour. However, while that was true back in 2008 as a European co-funded project, today its reach and activities are global. This makes sense because research is global, audiences can be found in any corner of the world (the Covid-19 pandemic has stressed this with cruel clarity) and therefore infrastructures and distribution channels carrying the research should be truly global in scope. Also infrastructures for monographs.

Services for research libraries and funders

All its services are based on an open e-infrastructure – the OAPEN Library – which holds more than 15,000 open access (OA) peer reviewed books submitted by more than 300 publishers in many different languages generating over 5 million downloads annually. The infrastructure and the books within it are open to anyone. The services offered on top of the OAPEN Library are for instance customised metadata feeds via API to library catalogues, integrating the metadata of the OAPEN collection in MARC21, MARC XML or other formats (also available through knowledge bases like Ex Libris Primo), tailored usage reports to the institution, community involvement and engagement. Deposit and monitoring services are offered to research funders, such as ERC (European Research Council), FWF (Austrian Science Fund), SNSF (Swiss National Science Foundation), NWO (Dutch Research Council) and Wellcome.

Services for scholarly publishers

When publishers enter into agreements with OAPEN, for a modest fee they get in return dedicated worldwide distribution. Their books get into research library catalogues and are being disseminated through library suppliers, such as ProQuest (Serial Solutions), ExLibris (Primo Central) and EBSCO Discovery Service. The books are also integrated in WorldCat (OCLC), BASE, and Europeana. OAPEN.org is search engine optimised and thoroughly indexed by Google Scholar.

The OAPEN Library is built on the DSpace infrastructure, hosted by Huma-Num (CNRS in France). Using open source software helps to ensure a stable environment for the OAPEN collection. Furthermore, OAPEN provides regular reports about publications, including COUNTER-compliant usage statistics (in collaboration with IRUS-UK). Finally, OAPEN collaborates with Portico for digital preservation.

Directory of Open Access Books

In partnership with OpenEdition, OAPEN manages the Directory of Open Access Books (DOAB) which is a dedicated discovery service for peer reviewed open access books with an open licence. It is a fast-growing directory which currently holds metadata for around 35,000 books which can be ingested into library catalogues via a REST API. Books in the OAPEN Library with an open content licence (such as a Creative Commons licence) are automatically listed in DOAB, which increases their discoverability and visibility.

DOAB is planned as the first service for books in the European Open Science Cloud (EOSC) delivered through OPERAS, the European open research infrastructure for the humanities and social sciences, of which OAPEN is a founding member. OPERAS is increasingly important to the humanities and social sciences as a fast-growing research infrastructure now representing more than 50 institutions in almost 20 European countries. Last year it applied to become part of the ESFRI roadmap, aiming to fill an existing gap in the European research infrastructure. OPERAS is also a prominent example of networked synergies highlighting that there is not just one service that can cater for all needs, but most needs can be served by a multitude of services.

To my knowledge DOAB is the largest international hub for peer reviewed OA books and OAPEN may hold the largest collection of full text scholarly books, but other collections also exist (Project MUSE, JSTOR, OpenEdition, SciELO, etc.) – which is beneficial for the community, for further development of OA books and for collaborative efforts.

An unexpected journey of a scholarly publisher

Looking back, it is quite amazing how my experience with monograph publishing ran parallel to the gradual transition of monographs to open access. In 2003 I joined Museum Tusculanum Press (MTP), a very *bibliodiverse* press established as a not-for-profit scholar-led initiative in 1975 at the University of Copenhagen. During the first years the primary focus was classical philology and related subjects, but over the years the press covered most subjects in the humanities and social sciences. The original objective was and remained to be ensuring a publication route for high-quality scholarship that didn't stand a chance with the

commercial publishers. As such, MTP really embodies the humanities press with all its struggles related to dissemination and sales of scholarly books in an increasingly digital context that presents new challenges and opportunities.

The early days of scholarly e-books in Denmark

In 2003 we pioneered in scholarly e-book publishing in Denmark. This came about as the obvious response to the increasing digitalisation of society. Also, print book sales had been declining dramatically over a couple of decades. On average a good high-quality monograph would then normally sell a few hundred print copies – quite appalling considering the amount of research time (often several years) and editorial resources that had been put into such a monograph – and even to make such sales figures was becoming increasingly difficult. Twenty years earlier, sales were much higher, but library budgets had for a long time been squeezed by high price increases on the journal side – often referred to as the serials crisis.

Our hope was that digital publishing could generate new revenue streams. We developed a DRM-based e-book programme and sold e-books to single users and on a licence basis to a couple of large Danish research libraries. However, we never managed to create a solid revenue stream through e-book sales. One important reason for this, I think, was our size – we published around 60 books yearly – and the fact that half of our books were written in Danish (small audience). Large international publishers have indeed found ways to make money out of e-books, not least through big licence or package deals with research libraries. With Danish being a small language and 60 books being a tiny output, our chances of prospering from e-book sales were close to zero – but we did discover something else that was very important. In 2004 Google launched its publisher programme Google Print (later Google Books). We joined the programme as the first publisher in Scandinavia and saw some amazing usage figures. The programme was very simple. Google scanned our full backlist (approx. 1,000 titles) and we gave them our front list as well to be included in the programme. We made 20% of each book freely available. The usage stats went sky high. We had published in more than twenty languages (however mainly Danish and English) and saw how digitisation of our books generated new audiences across the globe. This was indeed an early sign of the power of scholarly books freely distributed through the internet. Alas, sales did not really go up but nor were they negatively affected.

In search of companions

While all this took place, we kept on experimenting with new ways of distribution, but also with creating new digital book formats (XML-based books, multi-media books etc.). We realised the potential of digital publishing but also learned that exploring the rich potential of digital books was expensive and time consuming. All the while we kept thinking that we had to scale up together with fellow

publishers in other countries to achieve a future for scholarly e-book publishing that would be sustainable. I remember driving home from the Frankfurt Book Fair in the autumn of 2006 discussing this with my director for hours and hours on the German *Autobahn.* How should we initiate such collaboration? A potential answer came to us in a way we had not expected. Maybe it was luck, probably best described as serendipity. Coming home from the bookfair we decided, to our surprise, to take part in the opening conference of the European Commission Framework Programme 7 (FP7) for research and innovation. This took place in Brussels in early 2007.

Serendipity

I remember us thinking that we would be wasting precious time and it would be a long shot. At that time, I had no experience with the EC (this came much later in 2014 when I began working as an independent expert on open science and e-infrastructures) and my first impression was that we did not fit very well in the EC context. However, to our surprise we soon began meeting like-minded people. For instance, I remember meeting Sigi Jöttkandt and discussing with her and a colleague their engagement in setting up Open Humanities Press which they had just established. Although most open access focus at the conference was on journals, we met several book publishers. And we met Sijbolt Noorda, then President of the University of Amsterdam and very enthusiastic about open access and books. He brought us together with colleagues from Amsterdam University Press and Presses Universitaire de Lyon. We had dinner together and agreed to work on a European Commission eContentPlus proposal for open access book publishing. One year later we were a group of six European university presses (besides the three mentioned also Manchester, Göttingen, and Florence) and we had suddenly embarked on the first EC-funded project for open access books. In other words, the collaboration we had been looking for was suddenly a reality under the project name OAPEN.

OAPEN – a great project

The project delivered many important results, most notably a dedicated, open infrastructure for peer reviewed open access monographs and edited volumes as described above. But it also created a fantastic and dynamic network of scholarly publishers across Europe who shared an interest in exploring the potential of digitised books and the wider possibilities of digitalisation to the benefit of the research community. All of us were – as most scholarly publishing entities – not-for-profit. Our finest mission was to ensure the best possible dissemination of our peer reviewed and well-edited and well-designed books. During the project it became fully clear to me that open access should be the way forward for distributing our books. The OAPEN project solved the technical challenges. What

was left then was the financial challenges: the business model, the funding. We were therefore eagerly inviting representatives of the Danish research funding agencies to seminars arranged during the project in order to make them realise that public funding was needed to sustain OA book publishing. Alas, we did not succeed. Luckily, the attitude in the Netherlands was different and the national research funding agency (NWO) together with Dutch universities, the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW), and the national library of the Netherlands (KB) ensured the continuation of OAPEN during the first years.

Lack of funding – end of the open access journey for MTP

Due to the unsolved OA book funding situation, MTP changed its focus to more conventional publishing routes. And I moved to another OA publishing position at the Nordic Council of Ministers, but that's another story. Funding was and still is an issue for OA scholarly book publishing which must be solved. Returning to conventional publishing is not the way forward which the MTP case unfortunately showed – in 2019 MTP kind of wound down although its founder remains active. Of course, it is not a given that a shift to a pure OA publishing model would have saved the press, but I am still convinced that it would have been worthwhile to try and that it would have opened doors rather than shut them. The point here is that the conventional business model for monographs, based on print sales or even e-book sales, is broken. This is already very clear for smaller presses operating in small language areas, but it affects all academic book publishers looking at declining monograph sales.

Perspectives for open access books

I will not pursue the discussion related to the challenges of funding and finding suitable business models here but will just point to the need for research funders to engage in policy making around OA books and to offer appropriate financial support. And for publishers to explore the plethora of OA publishing business models that continuously emerge, e.g. crowdfunded models, subscribe-to-open models, library membership subscriptions, institutional subsidies models, and book processing charge schemes.

The OA effect – also for books

Studies show that OA scholarly books are much more downloaded and cited than non-OA books.[2] This is the straightforward argument for publishing open access

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[2] For instance, Christina Emery, Mithu Lucraft, Agata Morka, Ros Pyne: *The OA effect: How does open access affect the usage of scholarly books?* (2017) https://www.springernature.com/gp/open-research/journals-books/books/the-oa-effect and Ronald Snijder: *The deliverance of open access books: examining usage and dissemination* (2019), https://hdl.handle.net/1887/68465. More references at

– improved dissemination and discoverability. Adding an open licence (e.g. a Creative Commons licence) brings the book digitally alive in the international scholarly conversation. It gives fellow researchers and the public in general the opportunity to work on the shoulders of good research in an effective way while acknowledging the author(s) of the work through the application of proper attribution. Making this happen is to me the core of the mission of a scholarly publisher. Publishers should never become gatekeepers that prevent research from flowing smoothly in the scholarly eco-system. Publishers and other actors in the publishing industry should on the contrary open the gates and help quality-controlled books (and journal articles) enter the scholarly conversation and the public at large. As the experiment with Google Books showed, open digital dissemination of scholarly books holds a huge potential of reaching audiences far and wide and way beyond academia.

Discoverability and distribution through reliable, open infrastructures

Having worked with many authors I know how important they think that getting their book 'out there' is. We should not forget that many authors may have worked several years on their research to reach the level of a manuscript. Then add another year or more on peer review, editorial work and design. The journey can be long. I remember in particular one author – an ethnomusicologist – aged 80 or more, who came to us with a cardboard box of thirteen ring binders that we were to turn into a book. His 30 years of research into traditional Inuit songs in the Thule area of Greenland was based on another 30 years of research by his mentor. All this was turned into a two-volume monograph of 1,560 pages! Such a work deserves to be disseminated as far and wide as possible (unfortunately this book was never published OA). Open access is the key to optimal dissemination and no obstacle to a thorough peer review process, solid editorial work, beautiful design and even a hard back version. We need to bust myths claiming the contrary. Yet, I also know from experience that many humanities authors are skeptical and not easily won over to the OA model. After all their time spent on a book, they are not eager to experiment with the publishing model. Above all else, they are looking look for a proven and prestigious press that will support their reputation. I perfectly understand that scholars think carefully about their career when publishing a book and that the choice of publisher is an important element in that process. But good, prestigious publishing and open access are not and should not be contradictory terms.

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https://oabooks-toolkit.org/article/6528689-benefits-of-open-access-book-publishing-for-early-career-researchers.

Over the years OAPEN has been very actively engaged in such discussions. In the autumn of 2020, a new toolkit full of valuable knowledge about OA books was launched. OAPEN hosts and maintains the OA Books Toolkit which aims at helping book authors (and others) to better understand open access book publishing and to increase trust in open access books. The toolkit is edited by an international editorial advisory board representing a variety of stakeholders. OAPEN is also actively engaged in the newly established Open Access Books Network. In this and a number of other ways (e.g. project participation, counselling, and talks at conferences), we try to help the transition to OA books in the scholarly community.

Policy developments for OA books

Open access book publishing makes sense for a scholarly book publisher because it supports the mission of disseminating the scholarly work in the best possible way. However, it is not enough simply to put your PDF file on a web page. Standardised metadata and appropriate open infrastructures are important elements in efficient open access book distribution. This is exactly what OAPEN is all about as described above. Together with DOAB, OAPEN delivers open and reliable – and truly global – infrastructure services for open access scholarly books. The need for these infrastructure services has been vetted and approved by the Global Sustainability Coalition for Open Science Services (SCOSS) who recommends institutions worldwide to invest in DOAB and OAPEN in order to make sure that these services become financially long-term sustainable to the benefit of the scholarly community that they serve.

Monographs have generally been considered more complicated than journal articles when it comes to open access policy development. Consequently, books have – with only few exceptions – been excluded from research funder policies and national open access strategies. Often with an acknowledgement that books indeed should be investigated at a later stage. Now this 'stage' seems to be approaching and we see that for instance Horizon Europe includes books as it refers to 'all publications' in its open access policy. A Plan S policy for books has been announced to be in place during 2021 and we see more and more national research funding agencies including books, e.g. the ones collaborating with OAPEN (ERC, Wellcome, FWF, SNSF, and NWO). Also, in the UK, policy development for books is ongoing (UKRI). From a funding perspective this makes good sense at the book level (increased visibility and usage of funded research) but also because it aligns with the general shift towards open science of which OA books is one element of many. Furthermore, funders are attentive to ensuring that the humanities are also part of digitalisation in general and open science in particular. Since book publishing is key to many humanities scholars the transition to open access book publishing is a highway to fulfilling this mission.

It is also meaningful from a researcher and research institution point of view (increased dissemination bringing more downloads and citations). From a scholarly publisher point of view the rationale is intact, too. This was exactly how I became convinced of open access as the way forward for book publishing in the humanities and social sciences.

The need for community engagement

The current activities and on-going policy developments in several Nordic countries aimed at leveraging open access to books are very welcome and commendable. The Nordic countries face specific challenges (small in size and small languages), that make the move to OA both more important and a solution. New policies and funding opportunities for OA book publishing will hopefully help the scholarly publishers to change their practises and will create more trust in OA books among researchers to the benefit of the scholarly community. Technical infrastructures are a vital part of this transformation. Libraries and intermediaries providing content to libraries have traditionally been set up to handle acquisition of paid content, e.g. printed books. In most library systems acquisition workflows, cataloguing practises, discovery services and usage monitoring have been centred around print books and (later) e-books for sale. OA books do not fit well into the library world – which is a paradox, since libraries have been at the forefront of advocating for open access. Luckily, an increasing number of libraries are addressing this problem and the necessity of ensuring that OA books are well displayed in the discovery systems of libraries and that some of the licence budgets are transformed to support open access initiatives and services. This is crucial when the amount of OA content increases. When libraries begin to rely on open science services like DOAJ, DOAB or PKP/OJS, it is utterly important that such services are financially sustainable in order to stay reliable. This requires continued financial support from the community. Open and free to use services do come at a cost which must be covered by the members of the community.

Financial instability can lead to a shutdown which will create all sorts of problems for the institutions and the necessity to build something similar anew, which will probably be much more expensive and time consuming than sustaining well-functioning services. Financially troubled open science services could also be easy acquisition targets for large commercial enterprises who then will define the development of the services and most certainly at a higher cost. Through collaborative funding models, institutions across the globe can help securing open, independent, and transparent infrastructure services and through a variety of ways influence the development of these services through an open dialogue.

Feedback and input from the library community on the infrastructure services and their development is very important. Although OAPEN and DOAB are mature services in full operation they can always be improved to better serve the needs of

the libraries, the funders and the publishers to the benefit of the scholarly community. For instance, by being responsive to the development of persistent identifiers – DOI, ORCID, funding PIDs and licencing information are already part of the metadata scheme for OAPEN and DOAB – being attentive to publishers' need for more metadata fields, adjusting the API whenever needed, giving more data to libraries if helpful, continuously working on search engine optimisation, improving the usage reporting visualisation tools, etc. We must be attentive to the changing needs of the community and ready to adapt accordingly. To be able to do so we need financial support from the open science community, in particular from those research libraries, research funders, and scholarly publishers that make use of our services. Sustaining our services financially, allows us to continuously provide reliable, transparent, and sustainable open infrastructure services for peer reviewed open access books.

The End

A saga would normally end by stating that it ends! However, in this case it will be different. Having followed the amazing evolution of OAPEN and DOAB for a decade, I am really excited to have been granted the task to help ensuring that this saga will indeed continue.