



Open access: closing the loop

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Open access (OA) has already come a long way, and yet it continues to lack traction in some important areas. While OA journals have shown significant growth to a point where policymakers are no longer willing to compromise on a complete flip, books are still lagging behind, largely due to structural reasons. The competitive landscape in book publishing, covering university presses and commercial publishers large and small, is still highly fragmented in many ways. And even those players with the highest output do not yet reach a market share anywhere near approaching their journal competitors. Even more importantly, publishing books – whether paywalled or open access – is a far bigger economic gamble than the business of turning around articles in scientific journals. So what is needed in such an environment? We obviously require market places which offer access to multiple publishers' offerings at the fingertips of the researcher or the librarian. We furthermore need analytics which support publishers in shaping their publishing strategies, while the analytically-driven approach when deciding which titles should be made available open can also help publishers to make better economic decisions for their programmes.

Why market places?

For a market to develop it needs an instance where demand and supply can meet and negotiate the best service for the optimal price. Scholarly publishing has always been far from being a perfect market with its virtual monopolies regarding journal brands and books series, and publishers have seen little incentive to change the status quo. Open access is altering the conditions of “demand” and “supply”, and established publishers are beginning to understand what this means to their business models. They are starting to become more competitive not only with regard to their brands and impact factors when it comes to journals, but also with regard to services, thereby opening up the space to new competitors wishing to play a role.

But change is always comparatively slow in scholarly publishing. While it took only a short time to disrupt the music industry in the early 2000s, it has taken decades for open access journals to become relevant in economic terms, and funders like the Wellcome Trust or the Max Planck Society have had a great influence on the direction of change.

Nothing similar is likely to happen in book publishing soon, and even political initiatives in different countries will need time to change the rules of the game. As OA book publishing is growing significantly on a small base, publishing traditions and researchers' preferences (based on their perceived values) are more resistant to short-term changes. What we need is an Airbnb-like system, which would allow for comparison between different types of publishing models from a diverse group of publishers. This would help those researchers willing to change from paywalled to OA publishing and wishing to make more informed choices. Many librarians and researchers currently find it difficult to compare publishers' offerings beyond the brand and programme dimensions, and rarely see any comparison concerning the services which these publishers perform.

Analytics: squaring the circle

As regards the process of decision-making, open access is not actually so different from traditional scholarly publishing. Those who have access to funding are the ones who publish OA, whereas the rest cannot and do not. To date we have very little insight regarding how different product types in the STM and HSS disciplines work. For example, where should funding be mainly invested in order to make the most of it?

Library-funded open access – in my view the one model that will make OA really work – faces a further challenge: Content is actively hosted on multiple platforms in order to maximize the outreach to users, as many as 20 different platforms in the case of Knowledge Unlatched (KU). Each platform applies differing metrics which are constantly being changed, thus making long-term evaluation virtually impossible. And OA content is of course not just used within the IP range of a library, which is the whole point about open access.

Consolidating usage across all major platforms and – in a second step – allowing publishers and libraries to make their own analyses and benchmarking seems more important than ever. And my utmost concern: let's make sure to share information on impact with authors, above and beyond the notorious Impact Factor. It should surely be in everybody's interest to win not only the minds, but also the hearts of researchers when it comes to open access. They need to see and understand the new mechanics of publishing, and they will only do so once publishers and/or their institutions share key data with them – which almost none of them do today.

Closing the loop: bringing scholarly publishing into the 21st century

Open access has set out to change both the access model as well as the business model of academic publishing by giving back authority over publication decisions to researchers. With the backing of their funders, researchers in many disciplines have become knowledgeable about their new roles, but a lot of work is still to be done. In order to be able to allow genuine choice and hence a shift in researchers' long-term behaviour, more transparency regarding publishing opportunities is still needed. Transparency makes meaningful competition possible both in terms of price as well as service packages which authors may require in their specific publishing situation. The development of KU Open Funding has shown that publishers are willing to take on the challenge of creating transparency regarding their models in a way that they have not been used to in the past.

Analytics on the other hand help researchers and their funders to evaluate the impact not only of their research, but also the performance of their publisher in promoting the publication. They can compare the reach generated by each platform and they will be able to benchmark their own title's figures alongside those of their peers.

Open access publishing going beyond article processing charges will continue to become more diverse, as funding sources also continue to diversify. Open access needs to accommodate for this, and can do so by focussing especially on institutionally-funded OA. It is the researcher's university that usually spends a large amount of the funding for paywalled content today, and a transition to an open access world can only work if institutions start shifting their budgets away from big deals to what they have been asking for. A number of libraries have already started to take action, but there is still a long way for them to go to make open access happen properly. A percentage commitment would be a good statement to start off with, at the same time avoiding the need to continue funding publishing models which are often becoming outdated.

These views are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the views of UKSG.



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