

# Library Publishing, or How to Make Use of Your Opportunities

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*While the talk of transition and failed disruption abounds in scholarly communication, the opportunities for new paths are available. Libraries are set to make use of these opportunities. With forms of institutional self-publishing, libraries can drive change and at the same time surpass market failures of the prevalent transition period. With their already available (affiliated) brands, library publishing can lure researchers out of their inertia and prevent the uptake of self-publishing. This article will look into library publishing as an optional model, starting with a separation of self-publishing and institutional self-publishing and followed by a discussion of Book Processing Charges, the cost of monograph publishing, and how libraries can empower change with an effective reallocation of budgets into publishing initiatives.*

## **Small-Scale Publishing as Grassroots Movement**

Grassroots movements are key to driving change in society. This is just the same in scholarly communication, where most players somehow take part in change—for instance, the uptake of Open Access publishing. But the direction of change itself shifts away from the initial intention, moderated by the interests of the loudest or most prominent voices. In a commercial market, these voices tend to be larger corporations. Grassroots movements resist; they take up the initial intentions and try to empower them from the bottom up, on a smaller scale and often with a revolutionary prospectus.

For scholarly communication—where demand for change is loud but inertia and corporate business are more persevering—small-scale publishing initiatives are the important grassroots movements, and libraries and individual researchers their most prominent forces. Technology enables institutional publishing initiatives so that libraries can set up their own publishing units. This resembles the university press model, but they are more than just not-for-profit. They seem to be the socialist variant of corporate publishing, bringing back power to the people. But they are not to be confused with self-publishing, which also proclaims to bring back power to the researchers, but with an inherent exploitative twist.

### **Self-Administered Journal Publishing**

For journals, self-publishing inhibits a dilemma in its definition. Journals are always collaborative efforts with a combination of a few or quite many authors and technology-enabled hosting and dissemination. Open Source technologies like OJS have done a great job helping researchers setting up individual journals, fully Open Access and often even without a publishing fee. Most of the editorial work is borne by researchers anyway.

But these journal initiatives are rather self-administered publishing. The question here is whether a journal can by definition be self-published. A journal requires one or a few individuals as an editorial and technological centre. Those people are not necessarily authors of the journal, so that self-administered is a more appropriate description.

### **Self-Published Books**

For books, especially monographs, self-publishing is more complex. This is due to books being more difficult to publish and disseminate: editorial work, formatting, layouting, distribution, and all the work surrounding guiding the publication to the right readership requires some efforts and expertise, even only for a digital/print-on-demand version (or,

especially for a digital version). This is the reason why self-publishing for books cannot be easily handled with Open Source software. This opens an opportunity for technology providers to offer scholarly self-publishing.

Scholarly self-publishing takes the approach seen in fiction publishing to scholarly communication. A provider offers authors a platform where they can publish long-form content for a fee of up to £3,000.-. In return, the provider covers technical issues, mostly regarding digital production, print-on-demand, and parts of the dissemination hassle, for instance, indexing and registering the content (DOI/ISBN). The huge downsides are: extra services like Open Access often cost an additional fee, and none of these services are concerned with the content. There may be some editorial services like language editing and layouting, but there is no quality control, peer review, or content improvement.

### **Returning Control to Academic Authors**

This may sound like returning “control to academic authors” or “independent, transparent, fair” (the two self-publishers Glasstree’s and Publiqation’s respective claims). But what does ‘control’ or ‘fair’ mean in publishing? No peer review? No gatekeeping? This form of self-publishing is rather the embodiment of a vanity press than a liberating endeavour. The problem is that such a publishing outlet is not built to disseminate research, but to make profit on the researchers’ need to publish. When the content is repeatedly rejected by established presses, some authors get frustrated and seek self-publishing. Another situation may be that a doctoral dissertation needs to be published to be awarded the degree (like in Germany). This explains the price range: When you need to be published, you stop caring for the terms.

There have always been vanity presses for such purposes. Scholarly self-publishing simply makes this easier, and also raises the margins for the providers. The fact remains that this kind of publishing floods the market with many redundant publications. It is this service

that creates diversity and opportunities for new authors in fiction publishing—and frustration in scholarly publishing. When there are more and more unwanted and badly-curated monographs entering data bases and libraries, there is not much ‘returning control’ to academic authors. Researchers who self-publish do their communities no favour: All authors are also readers, so that the workload of going through the unbranded content to find relevant material is still on them.

### **Library Publishing**

The better version of scholarly self-publishing is institutional publishing. Libraries or other research institutions set up their own publishing units, providing a small-scale space for publishing books, journals, or even “more innovative publications and experiments with new types of content” as Kieran Booluck says about the newly established LSE Press (2018).

A key difference between library publishing and other models is its business model. Other than most commercial publishers who aim at generating profit, library publishing endeavours are subsidised through their respective institutions (Skinner et al., 2014). This means that the business does not even aim to recover costs, which would be essential for not-for-profit businesses, for instance, society publishers.

### **Creating Demands or Serving Existing Needs**

Another crucial aspect—and probably heavily dependent on the subsidised business model—is the strategy of library publishing. The endeavour is not set up for creating demands, but for serving existing needs (Hahn, 2008). The crucial difference is that profit-seeking businesses are required to create new demand in order to achieve the desired growth. When an entity is not required to fulfil economic growth objectives, this entity can focus on serving actual needs, which in terms of library publishing means effectively

disseminating research. The scale of this endeavour is mostly specified by the institution's researcher (but many existing library publishers specify that they are also open to not affiliated researchers).

Potentially, self-publishing technology providers—like those mentioned above—could help build the technical infrastructure for the institutional initiatives. But this seems not to be recommended considering that, for one, using those providers prevents new presses to acquire publishing expertise on their own. In addition, those technology providers are simply more expensive than necessary.

### **UCL Press as an Example for Success**

There are a lot of library and institutional publishers established. See, for instance, the member list of the Library Publishing Coalition. Some of them are more radical than others, some are more similar to young university presses. All in all, they provide an unprecedented diversity for scholarly communication because what unites them is their dependency on quality content. Now, it can be debated what quality content is, but the reactions to the publishing programmes of library publishers are largely positive and their content dissemination very much dependent on the research community—to which they have immediate access due to their affiliation.

Take, for instance, UCL Press, which thrives three years after its launch in June 2015. With currently six staff and about sixty books published, UCL Press is nearing a million downloads, which is not necessarily an indicator for quality, but for traffic and usage. With more than 15,000 downloads on average per title, usage outstrips sales in the market by far. Lara Speicher, publishing manager at UCL Press, says about the model:

“UCL supports its academics to publish open access and funds the majority of the Press’s costs. As a percentage of the institution’s overall research budget, UCL

Press represents a relatively small amount in exchange for the benefits the Press brings to the institution. Even though the Press receives revenue from print sales, retail prices are kept as low as possible to cover print and distribution costs only, so sales revenues do not cover all publishing costs. However, in terms of quantity, UCL Press's print sales figures compare well with those reported by traditional scholarly presses." Speicher, 2018

### **Concentrated Library Budgets**

Library budget reallocations are a strong motif behind library publishing (Mullins et al., 2012). En large, these reallocations stir an ongoing debate regarding the question, from and where to budgets should be reallocated within the library. Especially for monographs and edited volumes, this debate regularly surmounts to the claim that libraries were the real forces of change towards large-scale Open Access. Libraries indeed contribute heavily to more openness in scholarly communication, for instance, by paying authors' Book Processing Charges (BPCs) in parts or completely. But this budget reallocation has major downsides.

For one, paying BPCs means supporting a few authors while many others cannot afford Open Access. Overall, BPCs—as well as their counterpart for articles, APCs—systematically contribute to inequality in scholarly communication as they are merely shifting the constrains from the reader to the author. Likewise, intermediates like Knowledge Unlatched only veer the costs from individual libraries to a crowd of libraries (i.e. crowdfunding). For OA-underfunded clusters like the humanities, such a model can push change in the short run. But still the intermediate funds only a limited volume of publications while all the libraries' reallocated budgets are concentrated on a single for-profit-platform. For such a model to work in the long run—considering Knowledge Unlatched's growth aspirations as well as its move to STEM—publishing houses will have

to submit books continuously. Similarly, libraries will be required to pay recurrently. This basically steers Knowledge Unlatched towards a highly-dependent membership model without producing any structural change.

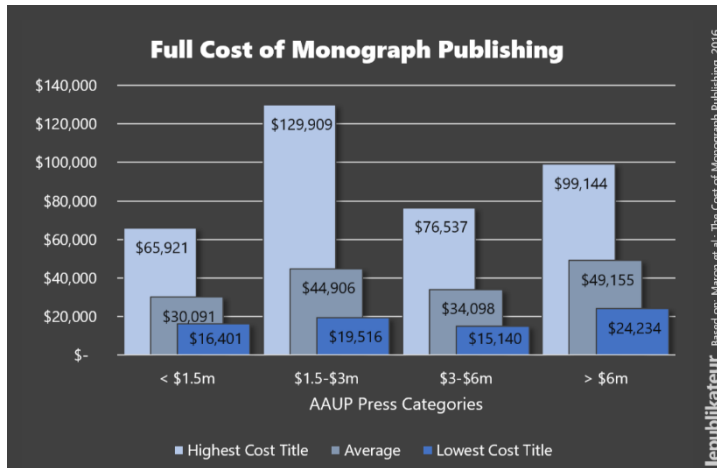
### **Excessive BPCs as Supporters of Traditional Structures**

Another downside of this form of budget reallocation is that paying excessive BPCs often means supporting the established publishing institutions and their traditional structures. Examples from library publishing initiatives show that excessive BPC payments are not necessary and even unbearable for the required amount of Open Access monographs (Tanner, 2017). The reallocation of budgets within a library can therefore better contribute to change towards both more Open Access and a more equal publishing landscape when these budgets fund the running of a library publishing endeavour.

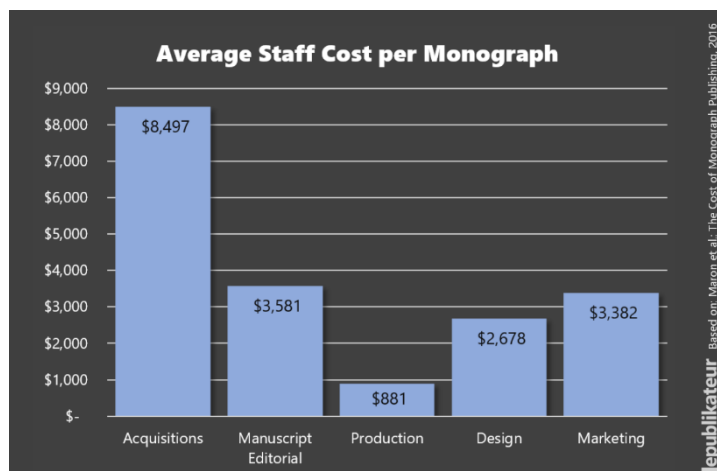
Besides all of these downsides, BPCs only contribute one part to the calculation of a monograph. BPCs range from \$3,000 to \$15,000 and barely trigger cannibalisation effects on sides of print sales (at least, in the minor Open Access environment that is currently prevalent). With or without the doing of Open Access, sales of monographs are at a low level of around 200-300 copies (Knöchelmann, 2017). Those numbers cannot add up to a sustainable Open Access transformation when they face the costs of traditional monograph publishing.

### **The Costs of a Monograph**

Publishing a monograph with all its overheads and direct costs amounts at university presses to up to \$130,000, with an average at about \$40,000 (Maron et al., 2016).



The bulk of these costs are staff, and within that acquisitions. As a library publisher serving needs rather than depending on self-created demand, those costs may be considerably smaller. This is a question of programme development policy within individual publishing endeavours. For publishing houses with a smaller scale and more focussed programmes, shaping incoming manuscripts and authors is more a question of quality control (the hidden costs from rejected manuscripts) than of chasing new authors.



For some it may be exaggerated, for most, though, it is not a secret that “from an economic perspective, most books fail. Most do not break even. You need the occasional



monster success to keep you going,” as William Sisler, former director of Harvard University Press, stated (quoted in Lambert, 2015). New presses—and especially Open Access initiatives—cannot depend on a possible future monster success, so that setting up a traditional press is not an option.

Add to this the impossible burden of BPCs on library budgets, as described by Eve et al.: “An approach relying on library budgets to bear the load of a transition to open access for books published in the next REF is not viable on its own and contains a shortfall of approximately £6.8m per year” (2017). And this is only locally relevant regarding the looming Research Excellence Framework (REF). There are many more libraries—also outside of the UK—which need to question their funding in a more radically open communication system: Everybody talks about the current period as a transition to large-scale Open Access. At a certain point, there will be a period after the transition, a time when most of our current cost and income numbers will not add up anymore.

### **The Dysfunctional Balance**

“Research institutions established their presses not just to offer new services, but precisely to challenge the status quo of an increasingly dysfunctional balance among research institutions, libraries and commercial players” assess Bargheer & Walker (2017). The future role of libraries is more creative than passive. They have many resources at hand, both in the affiliated academic departments and in their larger library community. With the ongoing debate about the future job of libraries—the purpose of libraries in times when information is no longer primarily physically stored, and provision and gatekeeping happen at a variety of positions in the life of scholarly information—the library is set to take a much more active role. This starts with institutional repositories and goes much further than only handling Open Access budgets or advising faculty on OA issues.

The diversity that library publishing can provide for research communities is on a smaller scale comparable to the positive effect of the existing landscape of university presses. It is supposedly a difficult economic environment for the monograph (Jubb, 2017). But it is so for years already, and the university presses thrive against all odds. One monograph at a time, the oftentimes small presses deliver astounding quality, especially in the humanities and social sciences. Their contributions to ongoing debates, especially Open Access, often seem more concerned with the actual researchers than with the business. Library publishers probably won't take much business away from the commercial presses—but they will add a lot of great content.

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