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RESEARCH PAPER

Reclaiming (Parts of) Scholarly Communication

Publishing as a Community-Driven Effort

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ABSTRACT

Community-driven open-access journals foster the idea of a biblio-diverse publishing ecosystem and challenge the prevalent commercialization of academic publishing. However, despite their importance, their existence is at risk. With little to no budget, they mostly operate on the unpaid labor of their editorial teams and the free support provided by public infrastructures. The first part of this article describes the model, key functions, and governance principles of community-driven open-access journals within the business of global academic publishing. In promoting fair, resilient, and gratis open access, they contribute to the evolution of an inclusive and biblio-diverse intellectual landscape. The article then concerns itself with the challenges that community-driven publishing faces within the system of academia and academic publishing. Emphasizing the need for more funding, engagement strategies, and wider responsibility, I close with some practical suggestions for immediate aid.

1 Open Access: Between Theory and Practice

The open access movement dates to the mid-1990s and is widely understood as a direct reaction to the "serial crisis" in academic publishing (see, e.g., Dobusch & Heimstädt, 2021, p. 430; Young, 2009), a substantial and disproportionate increase in subscription costs that led to affordability issues for public and academic libraries and, subsequently, a wave of canceled journal subscriptions.[1] This lack of access not only complicated the work of the academic community – because many journals and articles simply were not available anymore – but also prompted publishers to further increase subscription costs to compensate for the decrease in subscription-based revenue.

Advocates of the open access idea addressed this issue and used the opportunities provided by electronic publishing to challenge the pre-eminence of multi-corporate publishing enterprises in the realm of research dissemination by simply making research articles and books immediately available to readers. The rise of the open access movement also questioned – at least in its most radical manifestations – the status quo of academic publishing by advancing financing and business models towards a more equitable system. Furthermore, they argued for a wider set of stakeholders and more collaborative governance models.

Two key documents from the open access movement outline the project's core demands and prospects. The authors of the seminal *Budapest Open Access Initiatives Declaration* (BOAI Declaration, 2001), a small group of individual researchers, librarians, and editors, define availability and accessibility to research literature in the most extensive way and accept limitations only "to give authors control over the integrity of their work" (BOAI, 2001, para. 3). Although the declaration originated at a small conference on open access and open scholarship in Budapest in 2001, it quickly became well-known and was signed by thousands of individuals and hundreds of organizations worldwide. Two years later, the 2003 *Berlin Declaration on Open Access to Knowledge in the Sciences and Humanities* extended this definition to understand open access as a "comprehensive source" within a web that ought to be "sustainable, interactive, and transparent" (Berlin Declaration, 2003). In contrast to the BOAI Declaration, the Berlin Declaration, the result of the high-profile Berlin Open Access Conference (organized by the German Max Planck Society), was initially signed by 19 international research organizations. Regardless of their impact at the time, both documents assume an open and digital future of scholarly publishing that empowers authors to become sovereign agents of their intellectual property, including the corresponding research data and the comprehensive right of reuse.

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[1] Disproportionate with regard to inflation and leading to price inelasticity and monopolization within academic publishing.

In the following years, research funding organizations and research-performing organizations successfully fostered a transition to open access and removed locks on scientific articles, books, and data at an enormous scale. A steady growth of open-access publications was accompanied by the widespread popularity of open-source publishing tools and technologies, including the increasing use of editorial management systems such as Open Journal Systems (OJS) and Janeway, which lowered the threshold for lay publishers and significantly contributed to the rise of community-driven publishing. In the wake of this popularity, national and international research funders acknowledged the relevance of open access and encouraged their grant recipients to publish their results under open conditions (e.g., the European Commission's Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe, the Council Conclusions on High-Quality, Transparent, Open, Trustworthy, and Equitable Scholarly Publishing from 2023, and the German Research Foundation's strategy paper on academic publishing from 2022). Most prominently, we find several national research councils reflecting the radical changes to openness and accessibility in the system of knowledge distribution, such as the German Wissenschaftsrat's recent "Recommendations on the Transition of Academic Publishing to Open Access," a strong statement on future academic publishing policies in Germany. Complementing this, international research consortia, such as the cOAlition S, issue policies and strategy papers to make open access quotas mandatory and provide transparent guidelines for more open practices in academic publishing.

Hence, the open access model has come to represent the new standard for academic publishing, with many claiming that it promotes accessibility, findability, and interoperability of research results and data (e.g., Langham-Putrow et al., 2021; Pinowar et al., 2018; Björk & Solomon, 2012). Ideally, it can help to create mutually reliant communities that care for and share knowledge (Adema & Deville, 2020). However, the growth and popularity of open access have compelled publishing corporations to adapt their business strategies to generate new income streams: Instead of charging the reader via a subscription model, they have established author-facing fees (e.g., Article or Book Processing Charges; APC, BPC), creating new inequalities and dependencies within the scholarly community. Any form of publication in this model must be financed by scholars and their respective institutions, making authors highly dependent on institutional or project affiliations and institutions and projects reliant on dedicated open-access budgets and public grants. Furthermore, the situation has given publishers the opportunity to charge authors open access fees while continuing to market the respective journal using a subscription model (referred to as using a "hybrid model" or "double dipping"). Such revenue-based forms of publishing interpret open access as enabling not equalized access but new commercial means of knowledge dissemination.

Adding to this complexity, questionable practices pertaining to the digitization of science have turned research (meta)data into a mere currency within a larger system of knowledge dissemination. For most large publishing houses, aggregating and analyzing user data for targeted adverts and recommendations has become a rather profitable business (DFG, 2021). Especially in terms of science tracking, (quantitative) metrics, and the governance of research repositories, the academic landscape has become increasingly "platformized" and affected by the market dominance of global publishing houses.[2]

In summary, most commercial publishing actors remain largely in control of a significant portion of academic research without being sustainable, interactive, or transparent. This directly conflicts with the Berlin Declaration: Academic freedom, publishing independence, and digital sovereignty are threatened by the commercial twisting of open access. In this context, it is worth considering how academic communities can resist market forces and remain in control of the means of communicating their research. In the following, I discuss the scope and principles of community-led approaches to scholarly publishing before outlining its key challenges within the publishing ecosystem and then providing some preliminary, practical solutions to conclude.

2 Community-Led Publishing

Given the rather precarious state of academic publishing and scientific communication, there have been various attempts to balance the influence of large-scale commercial publishers. This community-driven approach has seen academic stakeholders strive to handle the publication and distribution of scholarly knowledge themselves, a practice that predates large-scale and commercial publishing but has gained traction in the past ten years (see Morrison, 2016; Adema & Stone, 2017).[3] Although there is no proper definition and a large variety of community-driven journals (along with an array of different science blogs and book projects), they share several common characteristics: At first, community-driven publishing projects in all forms were performed on behalf of or in the name of academia and academics (Moore, 2019), with "academia" understood in its broadest possible sense to especially include freelancing academics and non-institutional research. Second, the day-to-day operation of community-driven publishing projects is based significantly on in-kind contributions or "gifted labor" by scholars (Adema / Moore, 2018,

[2] The defining feature of digital platforms is their technical and social connectivity, which can be seen as the conditions for the relatively charged notion and concept of "platformization". This usually implies a multimodal change in cultural and social practices (see Helmond 2015).

[3] In fact, many of the most prestigious scholarly journals were founded and led by learned societies, enabling them to be considered genuinely "scholar-led." Now, almost all of them have moved to a larger publishing house.

p. 8).[4] However, this labor is not properly acknowledged by the academic reputation system or the publishing industry. Third, community-driven publishing projects usually do not charge authors, which qualifies these projects for the diamond open access route (see Bosman et al., 2021). Finally, but no less importantly, most of these endeavors identify as non-profit and non-competitive in the broadest sense while emphasizing the common good and cooperation as their primary motivations. Both the diamond approach and the non-profit nature make these publishing projects fair and more accessible for the academic community, yet much more difficult to sustain.

While there is consensus among academics and publishing experts that community-driven publishing is vital for the ecosystem of science communication, opinions differ regarding the involvement of academic institutions. Some understand "scholar-led" to describe being published exclusively by scholars and, therefore, independent of larger institutions, going so far as to avoid, where possible, university publishers or infrastructures entirely (see Moore, 2019; Steiner, 2022a). Others advocate for an understanding of "community-driven" projects that encompass strong institutional and commercial backing while continuing to reject large-scale publishers and generic processing charges (see Schlosser & Mitchell, 2019). In this article, I use the wider term, which understands that every "scholar-led" project is "community-driven" but not every "community-driven" activity is led by independent scholars. Following previous inquiries (Moore, 2019), my understanding of the term and idea of "scholar-led" pertains more to a descriptive sense than normative conceptualization, preferencing the inclusion of certain stakeholders rather than the exclusion of projects.[5]

Regardless of these differences, "scholar-led" and "community-driven" publishing projects are an integral part of a diverse publishing ecosystem and fulfill two main functions within academia. First, they contribute to a culture of experimental, collaborative, and community-owned approaches to disseminating knowledge. This culture facilitates, for example, the creation of new output formats that lie beyond the standardized peer-reviewed article and make the research process more transparent and participatory (Steiner, 2022b). They also take part in the ongoing publishing movement of developing and implementing more inclusive processes of quality control, paradigmatically displayed by the idea of either or both open and collaborative peer review systems (Knöchelmann, 2019). With these new forms of research assessment, it seems possible to become aware of biases while making the review process more instructive and helpful. Much of this extends to editorial work in gen-

[4] Measuring and properly acknowledging editorial work is difficult. The work is not only "gifted" but also largely "invisible" (Star & Strauss, 1999). I am grateful to one of the reviewers for pointing this out.

[5] Unfortunately, there are no dedicated statistics breaking down the field into commercial and community-driven journals. Steiner (2022a) provides a comprehensive overview of past and present community-driven journals, and the ISSN OA Gold List (Bruns et al., 2022) allows for filtering of non-APC and non-publisher-related journals.

eral, with workflows digitized to meet the needs of remote work and diverse editorial teams, such as by using open-source editorial management software and collaborative editing tools. Of course, these developments are inherently connected to advancements in electronic publishing in general and are not limited to the community-driven publishing segment.

Second, community-driven publishing projects have a protective function in the sense that they enable self-determined and autonomous decision-making at a time and in an age where the "digital sovereignty" of consumers and researchers is at stake (see Pohle & Thiel, 2020). Because many such projects use open-source software and applications (see Open Journal Systems), they can control the flows of publishing (meta) data and be transparent about its usage. At the same time, many community-driven journals question the widespread and nontransparent system of assessing impact using the over-simplified interpretation of bibliometrics and instead consider other evaluation forms, such as alt metrics (Sugimoto et al., 2017). This open approach extends to the use of licensing models that are approved for the creation of "Free Cultural Works" (see Creative Commons). Acknowledging that research benefits society as a whole and must be available for reuse, we find community-driven publishing projects widely applying the most open licenses to their publications.

Beyond these crucial functions for the open-access ecosystem and the publishing scholars, it is worth addressing questions concerning how to lead and govern community-driven publishing projects. The literature reveals three distinct principles that aim to transgress the norms of traditional academic publishing. This is important to note because many norms of traditional publishing are fundamentally opposed to a scientific ethos.[6]

To start with, community-driven publishing projects often mobilize and activate stakeholders by insisting on the common cause, that is, rebuilding the somewhat defective system of scholarly publishing. In doing so, they arrive at alternative ideas of inclusive community governance built around, for example, concepts such as "mutual reliance" and "care," and various forms of "commoning." As Moore and Adema (2020) recently recognized, "good governance requires rules and community trust within a social setting" (p. 2). Many community-driven projects have followed up on this by creating relations between projects and stimulating the bond within the community without focusing on personal gain, exclusive technological innovation, or impact. Instead, they have prioritized collaboration, tried to exchange ideas and technologies as often as possible, and assumed the common good of open and participatory science as the primary motivation of these communities.

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[6] There is no conclusive answer concerning an ethos of science. However, theorists such as Merton and Stehr have discussed, for example, universalism, communalism, and skepticism in a very convincing manner (see, e.g., Stehr, 1978).

Another part of this systemic change is questioning the widespread impulses towards economies of scale and attempting to make any business venture "scalable."[7] For academic publishing, adapting a model of "scaling small" (Adema & Moore, 2021) hints at a more reasonable approach. Instead of growing limitlessly and creating network effects,[8] community-driven publishing projects continue to cater to their audience, no matter its size. Furthermore, if any change or evolution is required, they become more diverse (in terms of, for example, output formats, audiences, quality assurance, impact, and distribution channels). Although "stay[ing] in the market" of scholarly publishing is crucial, Adema and Moore (2021) outline what is necessary for a resilient and robust community-driven publishing structure. Stakeholders can, first, build horizontal support structures among like-minded publishing projects and, therefore, create a mutually reliable network of publishing partners. Second, they can establish vertical collaborations – with, for example, funders, libraries, and developers – to create multi-stakeholder ecologies. This approach of horizontal and vertical networking is guided by collaboration instead of competition and reflects an inclusive approach to governance.

Although governance and business models define the internal structure and external relations, community-driven publishing also rethinks and redefines funding and financing. There are plenty of ways to finance open-access journals (see Keller, 2017), but these financing models are very much case-specific and often short-term and unpredictable. In this regard, being sustainable requires creativity and demands that the academic community rethinks scholarly communications and answers the question surrounding making publishing "resilient in the face of technological, institutional, and funding volatility" (Ottina, 2013, p. 609). For this, it is imperative to have a profound understanding of the scholar-led journal landscape. A recent global-scale study (Bosman et al., 2021) on scholar-led, fee-free open-access journals reveals that there is a "wide archipelago of relatively small journals serving diverse communities" (Bosman et al., 2021, p. 7). However, they face "operational challenges" and arguably rely too heavily on unpaid labor and the goodwill of public infrastructures. This leads the authors of the study to a comprehensive set of recommendations that include the call for (1) diversifying journal income streams, (2) building organizational and operational capacity within the journal community, and (3) implementing common and open infrastructures as designated keystones for a robust architecture of fee-free scholarly publishing (Becerril et al., 2021, p. 8). Practically speaking, journals may complement their single source of income – which might be, for example, institutional subsidies – with ad revenues, public and private donations, crowdfunding

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7 Scaling (or scalability) refers to the ability of platforms to handle an increasing number of requests or tasks and enable productive growth within the platform setup. Notably, scaling assumes that expansion and growth are possible without changing the nature of the scalable element or the framework of the system that is meant to be expanded (Tsing, 2012).

8 From a user perspective, this scaling creates what have been termed (direct and indirect) network effects, which refers to the usefulness of a service increasing with an increasing number of users (Katz & Shapiro, 1985; Shapiro & Varian, 1998).

campaigns, and freemium models. They also can save costs using institutional cooperation and designating publishing infrastructures, both as a community service and a long-term financing approach by committed stakeholders.

3 Challenges for Community-Driven Publishing: Funding, Strategy, Responsibility

As I have argued, community-driven publishing is essential for a diverse open-access ecosystem that benefits academic communities as a whole. However, many projects struggle and even cease operations (Laakso et al., 2021). Some of the many reasons for this are presented in a recently published manifesto by a scholar-led advocacy group (scholar-led.network, 2021; 2022). The authors first argue that there are insufficient financing and funding opportunities. At present, most financial sources available for scholar-led publishing are project-based or tailored to foster the transition to open access, rendering them disadvantageous to genuine, fee-free publication models. Second, there is a lack of strategic alignment of national and international open-access activities for scholar-led publishing. Instead of working together collaboratively and creating synergies, many stakeholders in many different places develop project-based, individual solutions concerning, for example, publishing technologies, governance models, and financing strategies. Because of their case-specific nature and often incomplete documentation, they are hard to reuse and not easily transferred between different institutional or publishing setups. Furthermore, different funding bodies mostly provide project-based subsidies without aligning with a large-scale funding strategy. Generally speaking, this indicates a fragmented publishing landscape. Third – and this relates to both financial and non-financial support – there is widespread ambiguity regarding which stakeholders are responsible for supporting community-driven publishing projects. This is mainly because these projects often serve multiple disciplinary, institutional, and national communities and require support from an equally diverse set of actors.

Addressing these issues, a recent project at the Alexander von Humboldt Institute for Internet and Society recognized that community-driven publishing projects can be supported and empowered by providing coaching and networking opportunities, especially on topics such as communication and distribution, workflows and processes, rights / licenses, and data privacy. These informational needs entail hands-on materials and guidelines for the day-to-day operations of journals. This can increase efficiency and streamline workflows, in turn reducing administrative overheads and transaction costs. Additionally, external experts and publishing practitioners can help journals analyze their business models and provide benchmarks for the editorial work.

As part of that project, results from a multi-stakeholder dialogue indicate six key topics (see Figure 1) that would contribute to professionalizing community-driven publishing. For every topic, the project team gathered a group of publishing experts and co-created hands-on publication manuals (Wrzesinski, 2023).

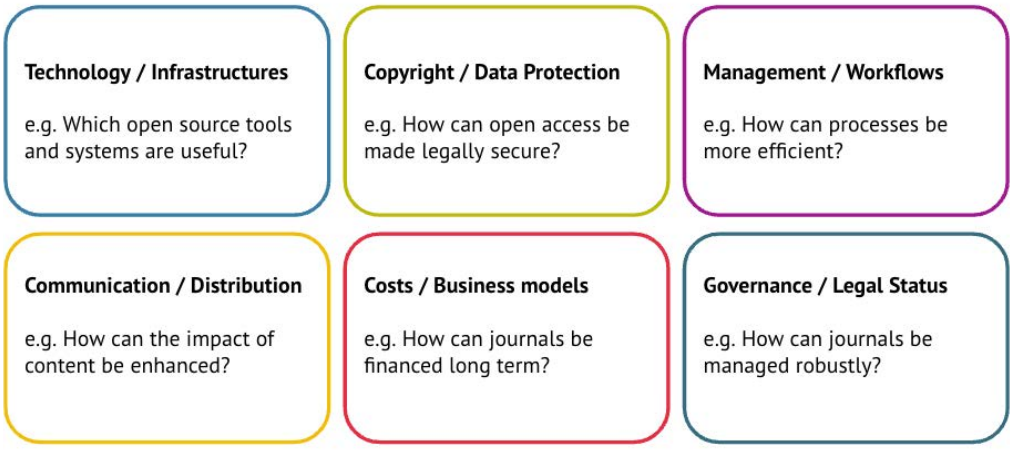

Figure 1: Key Topics in Community-Driven Publishing

Because community-driven publishing has only slowly been adopted in recent years, it needs an influential lobby that represents its interests in front of relevant research funding and performing organizations. Specifically, this includes creating awareness for the "gifted labor" and effort provided by editors and infrastructures and protecting smaller publishing projects as an integral part of a biblio-diverse publishing environment. Publishing networks such as the Radical Open Access Collective and scholar-led.network provide this sort of support and offer opportunities to discuss developments and trends in community-driven publishing.

Fortunately, many recent projects and initiatives address many of these challenges by, for example, adopting consortium-based funding models (see the KOALA project), building capacity within the community (see the DIAMAS project), making the publishing setup legally sound (see the AuROA project), providing deep insights on the publishing performance (see the CODRIA project), and developing new technologies (see the projects B!SON and OA Meta).

4 Conclusion

This article has endeavored to demonstrate the ways that the system of scholarly publishing is flawed and "broken" (Morrison, 2012). Starting with the ambitious goals of the growing open-access movement to unlock the majority of scholarly articles and subsequent policies to emphasize the consensus within the academic community. Unfortunately, as I have indicated, searching for new business models to finance open journal publishing has enabled equally new commercial means of generating revenue by charging authors instead of readers and by turning affiliated user data into a currency within the large-scale economy of scholarly communication.

Community-driven publishing projects have represented an alternative means of distributing scholarly knowledge that ensures research remains on the radar of most of the scholarly community. This not only aligns these projects and outlets with the values of fair and independent publishing but also strives to innovate the ways that we organize and govern scholarly publishing as a whole. This means arguing for more inclusive models for steering community-driven projects and implementing concepts such as "mutual reliance," "care," and modes of "commoning." Notably, these projects tend to question the ubiquity of economies of scale and discuss models such as "scaling small" (Adema & Moore, 2021), emphasizing quality over quantity and acknowledging publishing projects of any size and mission. Finally, as I have recognized, community-driven projects rethink and redefine funding and financing models, mostly out of necessity and to maintain day-to-day operations.

These fundamental challenges and ventures aside, community-driven publishing projects might want to consider three rather practical areas in which simple tasks can deliver immediate improvements. In a recent paper (Wrzesinski et al., 2021), we outlined the immense value of recent publishing technologies for keeping the editorial workflow lean and smart. This includes, for example, using open-source editorial management software to streamline editorial workflows and ensure smooth succession planning and transition. Meanwhile, markup languages and CMS plugins can automate layout and galley production to save on human resources, and interoperable systems and metadata standards can facilitate distribution and increase the impact of content.

Understanding diversity as a strength, community-driven publishers can extend and strengthen their set of stakeholders and funding strategies to include libraries, research societies, public and private RPOs and RFOs, and intermediaries of academic publishing (Waidlein et al., 2021). Of course, increasing financial responsibility and complexity makes a sound governance structure and a solid legal setup even more important, which extends to maintaining the integrity of the journal by protecting the name and the brand, the backlist content, and the corresponding data.

However, none of these suggestions can replace long-term and robust financial and infrastructural support as part of a coherent funding strategy by public and private stakeholders. These infrastructures and organizations should ideally be led equally by the academic community and, therefore, aligned with core academic values. Roadmaps such as the Diamond Open Access Plan (Ancion et al., 2022) provide valuable guidelines for the transition towards fair and independent scholarly publishing.

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