Commonplace •

Bring your OA game

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The end of June 2021 marked the finishing line for the [OPERAS-P](#) project, a European Union funded giant, in which multiple institutions came together to carve a path forward for Open Science in Social Sciences and Humanities. As part of the Work Package focused on innovation we investigated innovative business models for Open Access (OA) books. Our goal was ambitious: we aimed to develop, collate, and share knowledge on alternative (non-BPC) approaches to funding and publishing OA books. To fulfill this general goal, we wanted to better understand the perspectives of two crucial stakeholders in the book publishing ecosystem: libraries and publishers. Over the past fifteen months we have been researching, writing, and most importantly listening to the academic librarians and publishers to decipher their needs, hopes, and challenges they encounter when working with OA books¹. Coming from a publishing background, we felt that we had a relatively good understanding of this stakeholders group, so we started with the one we knew the least about: that of academic libraries. We wanted to know more about how they think, work, and decide for or against innovative projects for OA books.

For Libraries

What emerged from this research was a landscape characterized by great polarities². While some countries libraries enjoy relative autonomy in their decision-making processes and budget spending (e.g. Germany, Norway), others rely heavily on centralised systems, where Ministries of Education play a decisive role in the state budget allocations per institution and collection building on a national, rather than institutional, level (e.g. Croatia, Poland). This results in more freedom for experimentation and investment in collaborative funding models for OA books in countries with more flexible budgets, while leaving little or no room for such innovative moves in others.

There are also deep discrepancies between the members of the European Community when it comes to integration of Open Access into their day-to-day operations. In the Nordic countries, Germany, and the Netherlands, innovation and openness has become one of the pivotal aspects of scholarly communication; institutions are supportive, and there are funding schemes allowing libraries to invest in OA book publishing initiatives³. Other regions still struggle with full integration of OA publications in their

library ecosystems: there is insufficient funding, not enough human resources, and little autonomy of decision-making on an institutional level.

For Publishers

A similar diversity can be seen on the publishers' side: the landscape is fragmented with a considerable longtail of smaller and medium-sized academic book publishers that differ considerably in their operating structures, revenue streams, cost base, legal structure and distribution processes. What became apparent however was that these book presses are uniquely positioned and deeply-rooted within their communities in order to best serve their particular scholarly community (e.g. Language Science Press focused solely on linguistics and relied on their linguistics community for voluntary copyediting).

Collectively, academic book publishers play a vital and key role in realising a transition to open access for books within the scholarly book publishing ecosystem. We examined [nine case studies of European presses](#) using different business models, ranging from BPCs to library membership schemes. Among the most frequently voiced challenges we heard the lack of shared infrastructure, digital distribution and the reliance on a single revenue model. Academic publishers who attended our workshops expressed a particular interest in collaborative models and schemes combining different revenue streams⁴. In the future we hope to expand on that work with a publicly open database, from which interested presses could learn and pick and choose solutions that might best suit their particular circumstances. [The database](#) is expected to launch in the fall of 2021.

Takeaways

Our study reveals that when it comes to OA book publishing one size will not fit all. While it is possible to identify several regional trends and similarities between the examined countries, discrepancies between library systems across Europe as well as those among publishers operating in different regional circumstances showed that it is impossible to find a single EU-wide model for OA book publishing. This has important implications for international agencies considering OA book mandates and funding models - those agencies that do not explicitly recognise and engage with these differences and select a single policy will be implicitly favouring specific regions,

disciplines, languages and operating practices to the detriment of others. The [examined existing European OA book policies](#) show a wide range in how they are formulated, with some mandating OA, some only encouraging it, and some leaving books outside their OA policies's scope.

Both stakeholders, libraries and publishers, stressed the importance of regional context in which they operate. Libraries highlighted the importance of providing metrics that show the impact of OA books at a local level, such as for example the number of affiliated authors publishing with a specific press. Local relevance has similarly been stressed by publishers in the context of multilingualism and the importance of recognizing publications in local languages, especially in SSH, as well as acknowledging the existence of local publishing cultures.

What also united both stakeholders is a genuine interest in exploring innovative models for OA books, in particular those based on the idea of collaborative funding coming from libraries. The abundance of numerous library associations, which treat open access as one of the critical points of discussion, indicate the scale and importance of library engagement in open access publishing practices. Additionally, there are several small academic publishers exploring alternative business models for open access books, such as the opening the future model, library membership schemes, or relying on national subsidies. This interest is seen as coming both from OA born presses and those thinking about either switching to OA completely or combining OA and non-OA publishing.

The soil for innovation in the field of OA books is therefore fertile and the main stakeholders seem to be ready to bring their expertise, exploration, and OA game to the table. We hope that the research performed in the OPERAS-P project will be a good foundation on which to develop future groundbreaking initiatives for OA books. We invite you to further examine the documents, reports, and blog posts which were created as part of the project and contribute to the living report on academic libraries and the publishers' database. After all, it will be the scale of community's engagement that will decide of the ultimate success of the project.

Further Readings

1. [The final 6.2. task report](#) (including publishers' case studies) is available at [OPERAS Innovation Lab](#) community on Zenodo.

2. Full report on academic libraries and open access books in Europe is available as [a static file](#), and as an [open document](#) that the community can comment on.
3. Interview transcripts and regional workshop survey responses are available at [OPERAS-P collection at Nakala](#).
4. Series of blog posts on regional workshops for librarians:
 - a. [Library Support for OA Books Workshop: the German perspective](#)
 - b. [Library Support for OA Books Workshop: the Polish perspective](#)
 - c. [Library Support for OA Books Workshop: the Scandinavian perspective](#)
 - d. [Library Support for OA Books Workshop: the Southern European perspective](#)
5. Review of existing OA books policies
 A document collating existing funder OA book policies in Europe. [The document](#) is open so that the community can add new entries and collaboratively work on updating this database.
6. Series of blog posts on workshops for publishers:
 - a. [First workshop](#) for publishers on innovative business models for books.
 - b. [Second and third workshop](#) for publishers on innovative business models for books.
7. [Publishers' case studies database](#) will be launched in autumn 2021.

Footnotes

1. Interview transcripts and regional workshop survey responses are available at OPERAS-P collection at Nakala. Series of blog posts on regional workshops for librarians: a. Library Support for OA Books Workshop: the German perspective b. Library Support for OA Books Workshop: the Polish perspective c. Library Support for OA Books Workshop: the Scandinavian perspective d. Library Support for OA Books Workshop: the Southern European perspective [↵](#)
2. Full report on academic libraries and open access books in Europe is available as a static file, and as an open document that the community can comment on. [↵](#)

3. What is meant here is that libraries in, for example Germany, have higher budgets in general than these in let's say Poland. Since Germany is also pushing for OA with OA mandates, it is "normal" that OA activities have a place in library budgets.

Perhaps we can then rephrase the sentence to: In the Nordic countries, Germany, and the Netherlands, innovation and openness has become one of the pivotal aspects of scholarly communication; institutions are supportive creating funds specifically dedicated for OA books (e.g. [NWO OA books-dedicated fund](#)), and slowly creating environment in which open access for books becomes a norm. [↪](#)

4. More findings from publishers' workshops to be found in a mini-series of blog posts: a. [First workshop](#) for publishers on innovative business models for books, b. [Second and third workshop](#) for publishers on innovative business models for books. [↪](#)