Commonplace

Open Knowledge Infrastructures in Times of the Pandemic: Lessons from the first year of COPIM

Tobias Steiner¹

¹Community-Led Open Publishing Infrastructures for Monographs (COPIM)

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It all started with two backpacks and two rather inexpensive cross-continent train tickets.

It was January 2020, during a time that now feels like a world ago, and I was determined to get my affairs in order as best I could to embark on a relocation adventure that took me from mainland Europe¹ to the UK to start as project manager on COPIM, the [Community-Led Open Publication Infrastructures for Monographs](#) project that had sparked my interest just a couple of months earlier.

As an international partnership of researchers, universities, librarians, open access (OA) book publishers and infrastructure providers that is funded by the Research England Development Fund and Arcadia—a charitable fund of Lisbet Rausing and Peter Baldwin, COPIM is building community-owned, open systems and infrastructures to enable OA book publishing to flourish, delivering major improvements in the infrastructures used by OA book publishers and those publishers making a transition to OA. The project works to address key technological, structural, and organisational hurdles around funding, production, dissemination, discovery, reuse, and archiving that are standing in the way of the wider adoption and impact of OA books. In short, COPIM's mission is to realign OA book publishing away from competing commercial service providers to a more collaborative, knowledge-sharing approach.

With my own roots in Humanities scholarship, and work experience in a variety of projects at the intersections of Open Source, Open Education, Open Access and Open Science in Higher Education, I had been an avid follower of the work of many of the proponents that are now part of the project consortium. Back in 2019, I was thus more than thrilled to see so many aspects flagged in the project announcement's core [project outline](#) that aligned with my own experiences and personal set of values, and, after careful deliberation with my partner, I decided to send in an application, which turned into a job offer in late November 2019.

Figure 1

Looking back, the early weeks came and went by in a flash... impressions of my first train ride arriving at what would soon become my new home away from home in the [Midlands](#).

As 2019 slowly rolled over into 2020, what first seemed like an abstract idea quickly turned into very concrete practicalities when a work contract was agreed upon, and I started packing. Arriving at London St Pancras with my partner, both of us weighed down by large backpacks, and heading over to Euston Station for our last leg of a twelve-hour pan-European train journey, my enthusiasm was only slightly hampered when Brexit flags in a London pub window reminded me of the Damocles sword dangling above our European immigrant heads, with its promise to make things such as international travel, questions of health insurance, and the intricacies of living abroad in more general terms way more complicated, as some in the UK had decided that ending its membership in the European Union would be a great idea. Little did I know that this would quickly turn out to be the lesser of my worries.

Looking back from today, as I'm writing this in March 2021, at my first year at COPIM that had us navigate a hectic open access landscape amidst a global crisis, I can think of eight lessons learned during the past year that I want to share here — though I'm sure there are more — knowing that if following these principles helped us through a historically difficult year, they may also be helpful to others.

Lesson 1: Establish a praxis of interconnectedness

On my first day at COPIM, Co-PI Janneke Adema and the wonderful team welcomed me, and we quickly began our work to get the project up to speed. Janneke showed me the ropes to many of the internal processes I would be working with at Coventry University, and introduced me to the variety of partner institutions and international teams collaborating across the [Work Packages](#) (WPs) that constitute COPIM.

As one of the newest members on the project at the time, I sought to familiarize myself with the underlying philosophy and governance structure at work in COPIM. The foundational tenet at work in COPIM is a shared understanding based on mutual trust and horizontal,² inclusive collaboration between peers that guides all partners involved across a set of seven distinct Work Packages.

I quickly learned about the interconnected nature of many the project's parts in order to establish connections amongst Work Packages (WPs). While each WP has a small core team, the outcomes of each individual package inform and guide others' in addition to feeding into COPIM's collaborative developments at large. For example, the software development that is now happening in the [Discovery and Dissemination Work Package](#) to build an Open Metadata Dissemination System will form the core of an open source service that will play a role in the Open Access book platform that is currently being conceptualised in the [Revenue Infrastructures and Management Platform Work Package](#). In quite a similar way, key elements of the [Archiving and Preservation Work Package](#) link to the Open Metadata System and vice versa³, while research outputs on the topic of Archiving might also become integrated in the OA book platform.

More generally speaking, the work happening across COPIM's WPs might be understood as the interdisciplinary occupation with distinct perspectives on, and vectors of inquiry into the underlying questions and issues relating to the ecosystem of OA book publishing that are approached by the team in a complex and interconnected fashion — a mode that resembles a rhizomatic network of relationalities between single individuals, social groups (teams), partner/host institutions, and the technological platforms and services involved.⁴

Lesson 2: Maintain flexibility

Much of the early work on the project focused on establishing internal infrastructures and formal routines to report, explore, and negotiate ways to keep the burden of project administration as low as possible for all involved. And once we had our basic

project processes and infrastructure in place, we were gearing up to host our first major COPIM-hosted workshop just before the [Redux Conference](#) in Cambridge in the spring of 2020.

But then, the UK was hit by the first wave of the pandemic. All preparations had to be scrapped, leading to a major overhaul of infrastructure and programme setup. As Lucy Barnes, COPIM's Outreach specialist aptly noted in an early blog post reflecting on this:

Conferences were being cancelled right and left, so we had a decision to make: should we call off the workshop, or move to an online event? Not wanting to lose momentum in the project, and realising that we were likely to be restricted from physical gatherings for some time, we decided to experiment with holding the workshop online. ([Barnes, 2020](#))

Looking back on these lines one year later, I'm still astonished at the fact that, as a team, we managed to adapt to the pandemic and corresponding fundamental challenges to COPIM's short- and long-term prospects⁵ in the way we did. Thanks to the flexibility and openness of all involved to new approaches of working together — which also extends to the larger network of stakeholders and groups of participants that took part in our workshops and further collaborations — we managed to pivot from an initial focus on in-person interaction to online-only workshops with stakeholders across a wide topical range at a time when the large-scale Zoomification of events and corresponding side effects such as emergent privacy issues regarding the now-prevalent dependency of institutions across the globe on infrastructure provided by a private, for-profit business,⁶ or the psychological impact of day-to-day video conferencing as encapsulated in the term *Zoom fatigue* (see [Bailenson, 2021](#)), hadn't been as all-encompassing as they appear to be now, one year into the pandemic, in March 2021.

Lesson 3: Take initial stock of and track your risks⁷

To ease the minds of our funders and home institutions, COPIM made sure to translate the major impact the pandemic posed to project progress and outcomes to distinct risks. This assured them that we were actively monitoring the situation, while remedying the large-scale impact on all those working on COPIM.

Collecting updated items for the risk register has become an important element on the agenda of monthly consortial meetings, with a recurring action point and reminder set

to discuss elements that the consortium partners flagged as relevant, or to revise existing risk items. A sample of these items that follow a basic assessment of probability, impact, and suggested mitigation⁸ is included in COPIM's first-year annual report ([Steiner & Adema, 2020, pp.33](#)) that had been submitted to our funders at Arcadia and Research England at the end of 2020.

Risk Register (updated to reflect Year 1 developments)

Risk	Probability & Impact	Mitigation
Management Risks		
Key staff leaves the project	M/M	Recruit new staff from the extended community established around the consortium. Principles for the storing, sharing, and archiving of ongoing work will be agreed at the beginning of the project and all activities will be thoroughly documented.
Inability to recruit qualified personnel	H/H	Project partners will widely advertise these positions in their networks. Potentially suitable candidates have already been identified and will be encouraged to apply.
Failure of partner to complete tasks	L/H	Depending on the situation leading to the partner not performing to expectations, alternative remedial actions will vary from other partners offering assistance, initiation of project task forces, and in the extreme case replacing the partner. Provisions for dealing with non-performing contractors and penalties for non-compliance with obligations will be governed by the consortium agreement. Dedicated full-time Project Manager (PM). Dedicated WP to

Figure 2

Excerpt of COPIM's risk register, extended to include COVID-19 related risks. Part of COPIM's [Annual Report \(Y1: 2019-20\)](#).

Lesson 4: Explore tools that align with your mission and values

With the pandemic-induced switch to a project-wide and full reliance on online, working-from-home arrangements, the team's flexibility and openness was also put to a test when we needed to define which sets of tools we wanted to use to facilitate communication and collaboration.

We did not want to limit our exploration of open approaches to our research and development work, but also sought to commit to using open source tools and platforms for much of the project-internal and external aspects of scholarly communications, including the facilitation of collaborative spaces, and the setting up of outreach channels.

With a shared understanding of open values and the corresponding project focus on open source software and platforms as open and non-commercial alternatives⁹ to still-prevalent commercial services at the core of COPIM, we explored open source

solutions to cover the variety of aspects that were urgently required to realize a full-online project collaboration environment. These included the need for shared document hosting including a solution to facilitate collaborative writing, and also covered team calendars, Kanban boards, team chat, website hosting, reference & citation management, plus the now all-important element of video conferencing.

Based on positive personal experiences, and research conducted via the Radical Open Access Collective's [useful catalog](#) and the *Mind The Gap* report ([Maxwell et al., 2019](#)), we quickly agreed upon using the open source tools PubPub,¹⁰ Zotero, CryptPad, and OnlyOffice plus collaborative markdown editing as part of a self-hosted Nextcloud suite. With integrated file sharing, group calendar, and Kanban-style board facilitation¹¹, the Nextcloud platform serves as central teamspace, while Mattermost is used as open source team chat alternative to Slack.

Figure 3

A screenshot of COPIM's Mattermost interface, here: the Events channel, with which share details of upcoming workshops, webinars and conferences that might be of interest to the larger team.

The early experiences made with these tools also fed into explorative research for the [Experimental Publishing and Reuse](#) Work Package, which in turn led to an extensive,

recently-published report ([Adema et al., 2021](#)), which — similar to other reports published by COPIM members — will further evolve over the project's lifespan.

Lesson 5: Not all platforms may be compatible with your set of values

Our exploration of video conferencing platforms warrants an extra mention here because it serves as an example to make visible the continuing negotiations necessary within the complex socio-technical system that is at the core of any project relying on digital infrastructures.

Having experimented with MS Teams, Zoom, Convene (which had initially been recommended by the lead institution), and open source alternatives Jitsi and BigBlueButton during the project's early weeks, we quickly opted to rely on Jitsi for smaller group meetings, while BigBlueButton is now used for the majority of larger-scale video conferences and workshops of the extended project group of 30+ core members and external stakeholders.

However, when we noticed limitations in functionality with some of the platforms used, we found ourselves in need of compromise. For example, BigBlueButton (BBB) is now supplemented at times with sporadic detours to Zoom for those workshops that have a particular need to record Breakout Room activity for research purposes, as this currently is not possible with BBB.

In a similar vein, during our early exploration of collaborative writing tools, negotiations between values-based principles such as a focus on open source tools, and the need for actionable solutions became necessary when we noticed that some tools / platforms would not fare too well in extended usage scenarios which meant heavier load to the platform, or because implicit barriers to access a platform's features would mean risk of lockout of workshop participants.

For example, we really love using PubPub to document our progress on the project. In the very particular use case of sharing PubPub documents with workshop participants, though, we noticed that the presupposition of an existing user account that is needed to be able to compose text in a shared document means an extra barrier to third-party workshop participants who might not have signed up to the platform previously, and might be hesitant to doing so for the purpose of collaborating on a single shared document.

Another example in point was our attempt to use CryptPad to simultaneously collaborate on a document with 20+ workshops participant, which led to notable

performance drops, and subsequent syncing hiccups in the document that rendered the platform virtually unusable for our use case. Keeping in mind our focus on open source solutions, a recommendation for this particular scenario would include less performance-hungry tools such as Etherpad or CodiMD/HedgeDoc.

Drawing from these experiences, it seems pertinent here to highlight the fundamental need to engage in more detailed explorations of the different layers of communication at work in a given project's setup, if possible from a very early stage in the project. And once these different layers of internal and external project communication have been laid out for your project, a follow-up step might be to conduct research into the variety of tools and platforms available to facilitate one's project communication and collaboration scenarios, and how these align to one's project's set of values and overall mission.

Many projects don't exist independently from host institutions, and are thus partly dependent on external factors (knowledge, budget, varying levels of flexibility of which tools to choose from, questions of data privacy, etc.). For these project, this will mean that they will find themselves in situations in which they will need to consider and weigh available resources and functionalities that will be deemed crucial against a chosen tool's alignment with a project's underlying values and mission... and in some cases, this will mean to accept a bit of compromise, and to choose a pragmatic approach.¹²

Lesson 6: Leverage decentralization to create unique shared online experiences

Next to the internal-facing explorations to align the project's mission and values with the work happening across Work Packages, COPIM also is invested in Outreach work to widely share project progress and outcomes with a diverse set of like-minded initiatives such as the Knowledge Futures Group, or [FORCE11](#).

The core platforms in use to facilitate such open sharing and exchange comprise our PubPub-based [Open Documentation site](#), the Gitea/Hugo-based [project website](#), and COPIM's Twitter [profile](#). The Open Documentation site and community is open to contributions from all COPIM team members, and we also invite feedback from the wider public on all items posted there.

Accompanying these channels, COPIM members are active on a variety of community groups on [Humanities Commons](#), while new COPIM-related blog posts, presentations and reports and publications in a wider sense are also tracked via the [Open Access](#)

[Tracking Project](#). Next to that, COPIM is in continuous exchange with the newly-founded [Open Access Book Network](#), which is collaboratively run by Lucy Barnes, Agata Morka,¹³ and Tom Mosterd, who are representing [OAPEN](#), [OPERAS](#), [ScholarLed](#) and [SPARC Europe](#).¹⁴

On top of that, one particular activity deserves a special mention here: The brilliant conceptual work around, and subsequent realisation of [Open Publishing Fest](#), collaboratively conceived and put into practice by Coko Foundation's Adam Hyde, and COPIM's Dan Rudmann.¹⁵ The Fest, which took place during the second half of May, 2020, provided a distributed space for performances, panel discussions, demonstrations, and fireside chats, and brought together a smattering of scholarly, technological, and civic organizations and individuals, including members of COPIM. Open Publishing Fest turned out to be a two-week celebration of open publishing, making this a truly beautiful and one-of-a-kind online festival!

Figure 4

Figure 3: Open Publishing Fest - the [2020 archives](#).

Lesson 7: Share your strategies and successes with your community

Other activities that COPIM engaged in during the summer and fall of 2020 included a collection of national workshops between COPIM's Work Packages and librarians from Germany, Poland, the Nordic countries, and South Eastern Europe, to learn more about European libraries' OA books-related policies and practices. The diverse findings of these workshops informed the more fundamental research happening at the time,

which just recently culminated in the publication of a major report that provides a concise overview of the European OA book landscape ([Morka & Gatti, 2021](#)).

More generally speaking, the approach to scoping the larger OA books terrain from a variety of perspectives via an initial set of workshops has been a common theme across all of COPIM's Work Packages. Having been given the opportunity to participate in many of these workshops (and hopefully continuing to do so in the future) as part of the organising team helped me tremendously to find my footing in a field that I have to say I had only limited previous in-depth knowledge, and this has been amazingly thought-provoking and enriching, as it allowed me to learn from the expertise and wisdom that has been shared and developed further through follow-up collaborative write-ups, which subsequently were turned into key Work Package reports on these topics. These range from an exploration of the issues of OA book-specific dissemination channels and metadata standards, over aspects of exploring book publishing practices and tools, to the more wide-ranging questions of Governance for community-owned and non-competitive approaches to knowledge infrastructures, and are part of a larger on-going research and development process that will accompany all of those working on COPIM in the foreseeable future.

Throughout COPIM's workshop and product development, we explored a variety of routes to make those key reports publicly available. This exploration particularly touched upon making a variety of open formats available, and included embracing modern approaches to web publishing, while also already actively planning for preservation and archiving of output during the early phase of creation. Many of the reports are now available both in "classic" Version-of-Record PDF and markdown formats that are stored in our [Zenodo](#) community, while online versions of these reports are available in the form of living PubPub documents, with the most recent reports compiled as distinct PubPub books.¹⁶ For COPIM, this helps to open up the report-writing process by inviting others to feedback on a given version, and for the Work Package teams to further develop a given report document in an iterative way across the project's lifespan.

Lesson 8: Recruit as early as possible

As we outline in more detail in COPIM's first annual report, the project had to face a number of adverse events right from its inception. Most notable here for us have been the accumulating delays in recruiting staff across all Work Packages, including my own role.

Unfortunately, initial delays had then been further amplified by a secondary impact effected by the pandemic — namely the temporary hiring stops that had been put in place at many of COPIM's partner institutions, which in turn meant the institutional processes to set up job announcements were similarly put to a halt. Ultimately, this meant that many of the research positions that had initially been planned to be filled at the start of the project were affected by these delays.

Considering the rather fundamental factor that the need of getting open position slots filled play in a project's ability to start work on delivering on its work plan, the mention here might seem redundant to some, but drawing from the experiences made with COPIM, it is important to stress the need to advertise positions as early on as possible. This high-priority item might even include exploring options with one's home institution to see if starting the recruitment process of a potentially-successful project bid even before a formal grant acknowledgement has been made (this in turn would necessitate close communication efforts between the funder, the project, and the home institution).

Closing thoughts

Many of these lessons were well-earned by the COPIM team and have helped us to navigate what still very much looks like uncharted waters so far. At this point in time, it feels like we still don't know exactly where the project will come to land in less than two years' time, at the end of this most interesting of journeys. And we also need to take into account what feels like an ever-accumulating toll that the pandemic is asking of all individuals in our team — particularly of those that are more vulnerable or with extended care duties at home. I am grateful to have been given the opportunity to work with a team that is dedicated, always helping each other out as much as possible in the face of difficult external parameters, and mustering the day-to-day motivation to work as flexibly as possible during these continued challenges.

I hope the above paragraphs have helped to shed some light on the kinds of work that a project manager might be engaging in when working in a project such as COPIM and its underlying guiding principle of 'Scaling Small', which Janneke Adema and Sam Moore describe as:

the idea that scale can be nurtured through intentional collaborations between community-driven projects that promote a biodiverse ecosystem while providing resilience through resource sharing and other kinds of collaboration. ([Adema & Moore, 2021](#))

The practices described here ought not to be necessarily understood as universal ‘best practices’. The situatedness of infrastructure in the sense of a complex socio-technical system in any given project is dependent on a large set of context-specific parameters, many of them resulting in the need to seek continuous negotiations and compromise to adapt a given approach to one’s own situation.

That said, working in a project in which the Scaling Small paradigm is employed as a guiding principle that implicitly informs most aspects of project governance, and thus management of said project, is definitely worth a try.

And finally, if any of you, dear readers, have lessons from your own experiences to add, or examples and colour to lend to my lessons, please do share them in the comments or as annotations!

Header image: cropped remix, original: [Job Savelsberg](#) on Unsplash

Footnotes

1. Northern Germany, to be more precise. ↵
2. In the context of COPIM, “horizontal” collaboration points to the alliances sought in the consortium between community-led presses, libraries, infrastructure providers, researchers and universities involved to develop alternative economies of scale that build on the provision and exchange of shared resources, lived experiences, practices, and knowledge.

For more on COPIM’s understanding of horizontal collaboration, see e.g. the [DARIAHOpen interview](#) with Janneke Adema and Lucy Barnes, 2019; [Adema & Moore, 2017](#); [Adema, 2018](#); Adema & Moore, “[Scaling Small; Or How to Envision New Relationalities for Knowledge Production](#)”, 2021. ↵

3. e.g. to feed metadata that is specific to aspects of preservation and archiving into the development of Thoth. ↵
- 4.

I use Deleuze and Guatarri's metaphor of the *rhizome* here to hint at the interconnected, non-hierarchical and non-competitive nature of the mode of engagement at work between COPIM partners.

For an infinitely more elaborate and nuanced exploration of the Scaling Small paradigm informing our work on COPIM, see Janneke and Sam's recently-published paper:

Adema & Moore, "Scaling Small; Or How to Envision New Relationalities for Knowledge Production". Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture. 2021. <https://doi.org/10.16997/wpcc.918>

5. With the [Institute for Fiscal Studies estimating](#) a loss in UK's Higher Education sector between £3 billion and £19 billion, or between 7.5% approx 50% of the sector's overall income in one year. [↵](#)

6. See e.g. [The Guardian](#), 2020 or this [updated March 2021 list of issues](#); also [The Verge](#), 2020. [↵](#)

7. A footnote here as I am not sure if the practice of keeping a risk register is a universal element for funding bids across the globe. In the context of COPIM, we use a risk register that plays a key part as project management tool in funder- and lead institution-facing communications and documentation. A risk register highlights risks and issues that the project foresees as having an impact on the project outcome, and suggests mitigation strategies to avoid these, if possible... [↵](#)

8. Coventry University advice has been to follow the [PRINCE2 framework](#) for risk assessment and reporting. [↵](#)

9. For further thoughts, see e.g. Janneke Adema and Graham Stone on [Taking back control](#), Adam Hyde's [discussion of open source and scholarly publishing](#), or Jeff Pooley's discussion of the role of [non-profit approaches in scholarly communication](#). [↵](#)

10.

Our usage of PubPub as an [Open Documentation site](#) and collaborative space has been described by Dan Rudmann in Heather Staines' 2020 article "[Investing in a brighter future](#)".

Further aspects of exploring scholarly writing in PubPub, with a particular focus on writing research reports and using Zotero have been covered in my pub "[Using](#)

[PubPub for scholarly output: Import, Collaboration, Citations, and Zotero](#)". ↵

11. Via the Deck app: <https://apps.nextcloud.com/apps/deck> ↵

12. For further explorations in the context of another open community, see e.g. this blog post on the [role of open infrastructures in Open Scholarship](#). ↵

13. Find an in-depth interview with Agata on [OBP's blog](#). ↵

14. See Bonnie Russell's recent in-depth "Commons Highlights: Open Access Book Network" [blog post on Humanities Commons](#). ↵

15. See Dan's [own thoughts & reflection](#) on the inception of Open Publishing Fest. ↵

16. Note that PubPub also makes output available in a variety of open and closed formats, and also boasts a new feature called "Connections" to make relationalities between documents visible.

See our overview of reports at: <https://copim.pubpub.org/reports> ↵

Citations

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