Open Knowledge Infrastructures in Times of the Pandemic: My first year with COPIM

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Community-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 Europe 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.
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.

Now in 2021, I have the hindsight to look back at my first year at COPIM, navigating a hectic open access landscape amidst a global crisis. I can think of 8 key lessons, though I’m sure there are more, from the past year that I share knowing that if following these principles helped us through an historically difficult year, they may be helpful to others, especially in better times.
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 other’s 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 can be applied to 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 in the Archiving and Preservation Work Package link to the Open Metadata System and vice versa\(^3\), 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. Once we had our infrastructure in place, we
were getting ready 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 prospects 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, 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 risks

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.

**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 PubPub, 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 facilitation, the Nextcloud platform serves as central teamspace, while Mattermost is used as open source team chat alternative to Slack.

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, 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 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. Personally, I think there’s not much harm done as long as one can make sure that a reasonable amount of informed explorative efforts has been made.

**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, and Tom Mosterd, who are representing OAPEN, OPERAS, ScholarLed and SPARC Europe.

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. 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!

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 had only very 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 development and publication of 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 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. 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 to me 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 bibliodiverse 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, readers, have lessons from your own experiences to add, or examples and color to lend to my lessons, please do share them in the comments or as annotations!

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### 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:


5. With the [Institute for Fiscal Studies estimating](https://www.ifs.org.uk) 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. ←


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](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-guidance-for-princed). ←

9. For further thoughts, see e.g. Janneke Adema and Graham Stone on [Taking back control](https://www.janneke.com/taking-back-control), Adam Hyde’s [discussion of open source and scholarly publishing](https://www.janneke.com/taking-back-control), or Jeff Pooley’s discussion of the role of [non-profit approaches in scholarly communication](https://www.janneke.com/taking-back-control).

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”](https://www.janneke.com/taking-back-control).

   Further aspects of exploring scholarly writing in PubPub, with a particular focus on writing research reports and using Zotero have been covered in a my pub “[Using PubPub for scholarly output: Import, Collaboration, Citations, and Zotero](https://www.janneke.com/taking-back-control)”. ←
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


