Community-Governed and Community-Paid Publishing: Resilient Support for Independent Open Access Journals

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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. But despite their importance, their existence is threatened. With little to no budget they operate mostly on "gifted labor" (Adema/Moore, 2018, 8) by their editorial teams and free support 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 publishing ecosystem. In the second part I will detail ways to support community-driven open access journals, e.g., through substantial funding, coaching, and networking. Following-up on this, I will end with introducing a network developed by the Alexander von Humboldt Institute for Internet and Society that provides information materials and increases visibility for these journals.

1 INTRODUCTION

The open access movement dates to the mid-1990s and is widely understood as a direct reaction to the so-called "serial crisis" (see, e.g., Dobusch & Heimstädt, 2021, p. 430ff.) in academic publishing—this concerned a substantial and disproportionate increase in subscription costs, which led to affordability issues for public and academic libraries and a wave of journal subscription cancellations. This lack of access not only complicated the work of the academic community but led publishers to further increase subscription costs.

Advocates of the open access idea addressed this issue and used the opportunities offered by electronic publishing to loosen the grip of multi-corporate publishing enterprises on research dissemination. If research results, in the form of scholarly articles, can be distributed electronically, printing and publishing services can be rendered obsolete. Beyond these practical considerations, the rising open access movement, at least in its most radical manifestations, challenged the status quo of academic publishing and tried to advance towards more equitable financing and business models.

Two key documents of the open access movement outline their core demands and prospects. The seminal *Budapest Open Access Initiatives Declaration* from 2001 defines the availability and accessibility of research literature in the most extensive way and accepts limitations only "to give authors control over the integrity of their work" (BOAI, 2001). Adding to this, the 2003 *Berlin Declaration on Open Access to Knowledge in the Sciences and Humanities* understands open access as a "comprehensive source" within a web that ought to be "sustainable, interactive, and transparent" (Berlin Declaration, 2003).

In the following years, organizations that fund and conduct research successfully fostered a transition to open access and unlocked scientific articles, books, and data on an enormous scale. To give a few examples:

- There has been a steady growth in open access publications, accompanied by the growing popularity of open-source publishing tools and technologies (see the increasing use of editorial management systems like OJS, which has significantly contributed to the rise of community-driven publishing).

- National and international research funders have acknowledged the relevance of open access by requiring their grant recipients to publish their results—if possible—under open conditions (see the European Commission with Horizon 2020 or Horizon Europe respectively).

- National based research councils have also participated in the radical shift to openness and accessibility in the system of knowledge distribution: For example, recently, the German

Wissenschaftsrat released "Recommendations on the Transition of Academic Publishing to Open Access," which is a strong statement on future policies in German academic publishing.

- International research consortia (e.g., cOAlition S) have issued policies and strategy papers in order to make open access quotas mandatory and provided transparent guidelines for better open practices in academic publishing.

Considering the above-mentioned developments, open access is soon to be the new standard in academic publishing—if this is not the case already—and promotes accessibility, findability, interoperability of research results and data. Ideally, it should help to create mutually dependent communities that care for and share knowledge.

Yet, in response to the growth and popularity of open access, publishing corporations have adapted their business strategies to generate new streams of revenue. Consequently, new business models have emerged that involve charging authors publication fees (called "article processing charges") and created new inequalities and dependencies. In such cases, open access is not being used to equalize access but to enable new commercial means of knowledge dissemination. At the same time, and in the wake of the advancing digitalization of science, practices such as science tracking and predatory publishing have emerged and turned research data and articles into a mere currency within a larger system of knowledge dissemination. Broadly speaking, it seems that major publishing corporations remain largely in control of a significant portion of academic research despite not being sustainable, interactive, or transparent. This directly conflicts with the Berlin Declaration: Academic freedom, digital independence and digital sovereignty are being threatened by a commercial subversion of open access. So, the question is: How can researchers publish open access *and* remain in control of their article and data?

2   EXPLAINING COMMUNITY-DRIVEN PUBLISHING

One of the most intuitive strategies to counter the influence of the publishing industry (with its various attempts at commodification) is to exclude these commercial third parties and handle the publication and distribution of scholarly knowledge yourself. Often referred to as community-driven or scholar-led publishing, it is a practice that predates large-scale and commercial publishing—in fact, many of the most prestigious scholarly journals were founded by learned societies—but it has gained pace within the past ten years (cf. Morrison, 2016; Adema & Stone, 2017). While there is no proper definition of community-driven journals, science blogs, and book projects—and a large variety of them—there are a few common characteristics: Community-driven publishing endeavors are carried out on behalf or in the name of academia and academics (Moore, 2019); their day-to-day operation is based significantly on in-kind contributions or "gifted labor" by scholars (Adema/Moore, 2018, p. 8);

there are no charges for readers or authors in order to publish in or read them, which qualifies them for the diamond open access route (cf. Bosman et al., 2021); and most of them identify as nonprofit and noncompetitive in the broadest sense while emphasizing the common good and cooperation as their motivating factors. Based on these characteristics, community-driven publishing is an integral part of a diverse publishing ecosystem that fulfills two main functions.

1. Community-driven publishing projects foster a culture of experimental, collaborative and community-owned approaches to disseminating knowledge. This culture facilitates the creation of new output formats (beyond the somewhat dated peer-reviewed article), the development and testing of more inclusive processes of quality assurance, the revision of workflows, and the identification of administrative best practices etc.

2. Community-driven publishing projects enable self-determined and autonomous decision making in a time and age where consumers' and researchers' "digital sovereignty" is threatened (cf. Pohle/Thiel, 2020). More specifically, scholars remain largely in control over publishing (meta) data if they use open-source software and applications (in the form of Open Journal Systems). At the same time, they can question the widespread and nontransparent system of assessing impact through bibliometrics while increasing acceptance for other forms of evaluation, e.g., by alt metrics. Lastly, community-driven publishing projects may use license models that are approved for creating "free cultural works" (for instance, Creative Commons licensing).

Beyond these crucial functions for the open access ecosystem and its stakeholders, community-driven publishing seems to be guided by three principles that cater to the idea of a fair and truly open publishing landscape.

2.1 INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE

To start with, to make community-driven publishing projects successful, initiators must mobilize and activate stakeholders by insisting on the common cause—that is, rebuilding the "broken" system of scholarly publishing. In doing so, they must come up with alternative ideas of "community governance"—e.g., around concepts like "mutual reliance," "care," and a variety of forms of "commoning" As Adema and Moore recently pointed out, "good governance requires rules and community trust within a social setting" (Adema/Moore 2020). Yet this somewhat entrepreneurial spirit should not be motivated by a fetish for technological innovation or the associated business around it but rather by the desire to create relations between projects and stimulate the bond within the community.

2.2 SCALING SMALL

Another part of this systemic change is to question the widespread economies of scale and the attempt to make any business venture "scalable." For academic publishing, stakeholders should consider "scaling small" (Adema & Moore, 2021), continuing catering to their niche, or, if any evolution is required, becoming more diverse—e.g., in terms of output format, audiences, quality assurance, impact, and distribution channels. While it is crucial for scholars to "stay in the market" of scholarly publishing, there are many steps that can be taken to ensure a resilient and robust structure of community-driven publishing, as Adema and Moore outline in their article (Adema & Moore, 2021). Stakeholders can, first, build horizontal support structures amongst like-minded publishing projects and therefore create a mutually reliable network of publishing partners. And they can, second, establish vertical collaborations—e.g., with funders, libraries, developers etc.—to create multi-stakeholder ecologies. This approach of horizontal and vertical networking is guided by collaboration instead of competition and reflects the aforementioned inclusive approach to governance.

2.3 CREATIVE FINANCING

While governance and business models define the internal structures and external relations, community-driven publishing must rethink and redefine funding and financing as well. David Ottina, one of the directors of the Open Humanities Press, once challenged the academic community to rethink scholarly communications and find an answer to "how we can make it resilient in the face of technological, institutional, and funding volatility" (Ottina 2013). In that regard, ideas from a recent, global-scale diamond open access study (Bosman et al., 2021) indicated that diversified income streams, constant public support, and common and open infrastructures are keystones for a robust architecture of fee-free scholarly publishing.

3 SUPPORTING COMMUNITY-DRIVEN OPEN ACCESS

As many studies have shown, community-driven publishing is essential for a diverse open access ecosystem. Yet many projects struggle or, even worse, cease operations (see scholar-led.network, 2021). But what can researchers, open access activists, developers and librarians do in order to support them?

In two research projects, the Alexander von Humboldt Institute for Internet and Society assessed the support that is needed to sustain community-driven publishing (Waidlein et al., 2021; Wrzesinski et al, 2021). In conclusion, they identified three areas in which this publishing segment requires substantial assistance.

3.1 FUNDING

In order to maintain high publication quality and stay a reliable partner for researchers, community-driven journals need long-term and robust financial support that is part of a coherent funding strategy by public and private stakeholders. Ideally, these funding structures and organizations should be led by the academic community so that the distribution of subsidies is guided by the interests of academia. As studies on the precarious situation of small and interdisciplinary journals have shown, funding also needs to be extended to the margins of open access publishing (Bosman et al., 2021).

3.2 COACHING

Academic editors and journal managers need dedicated information materials, guidelines, and peer-to-peer consulting that provides practical support for the day-to-day journal business. This will increase efficiency and streamline workflows, which in turn reduces administrative overheads and transaction costs. Additionally, external experts and publishing practitioners can assist journals in analyzing their business models and provide benchmarks for the editorial work.

3.3 NETWORKING

As a relatively new phenomenon, community-driven publishing needs an influential lobby that represents its interests in front of relevant organizations that fund and conduct research. Specifically, this includes creating awareness of 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. Regular networking events are one way to go and offer opportunities to discuss developments and trends in community-driven publishing.

4 TURNING RESOURCES INTO PRACTICES

The project "Scholar-led Plus" at the Alexander von Humboldt Institute for Internet and Society (HIIG) is dedicated to a systemic change and addresses multiple of the above-mentioned challenges by developing a comprehensive set of knowledge resources. Considering the community of practice as a community of experts, the project has formed working groups on six key topics in community-driven publishing that were previously identified in several stakeholder meetings:
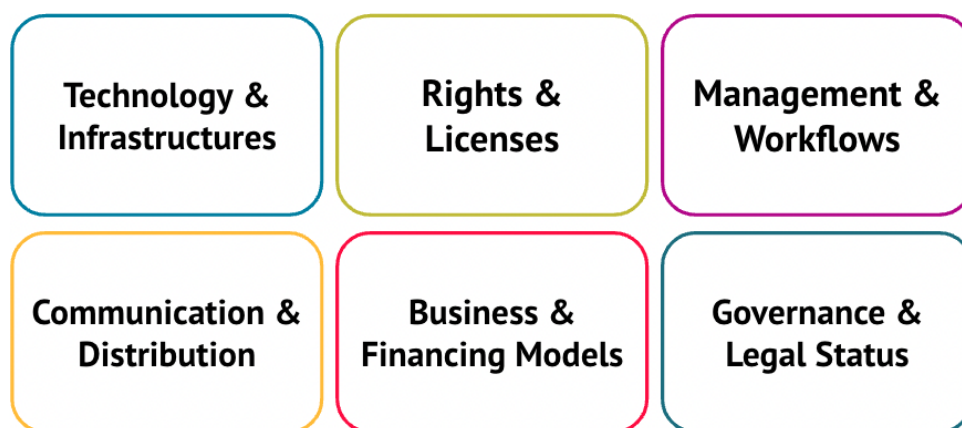
Figure 1. Key topics in community-driven publishing.

These working groups have worked to prepare six publication manuals and are serving as points of contact for practical inquiries on issues related to community-driven publishing in Germany. Towards the end of the project in Spring 2023, there will also be a set of (recorded) webinars that document the practical knowledge resources. Adding to this, HIIG will create strategic knowledge resources based on a Delphi study and a workshop series. This includes (1) a strategy paper on future trends and scenarios and (2) a policy paper on how to build resilient support for community-driven publishing. Both the practical and strategic resources will be made further accessible through roundtable discussions at HIIG in the first half of 2023, which will offer room for networking and exchange on the future of scholarly publishing.

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