

Evaluation of Books: Introduction

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ABSTRACT

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Context

Books and outputs related to books (book chapters, reports etc.) are an important scientific output in humanities. As reported in the previous session, therefore, books need to play a role in research evaluation is to provide meaningful results. This opens the next question: how, then, are books evaluated? reasons: First, evaluation is a time-consuming activity (if it is done properly) and, therefore, to avoid evaluation could benefit from taking into account the evaluation used during the publication process. Second, evaluation and studying how books are evaluated by those who publish them means benefiting from a few hundred evaluating books.

So, by reflecting on how books are evaluated today and in the past, in different contexts, we are gaining roles of the book in scientific communication, what are ways how a book is constructed, how are publishers how are peers reading and assessing those books. We might also identify different types of books by their publishers, authors and reviewers (e.g., books for career advancements, books to a wider audience, books of works into a coherent bigger picture, books to present the state of the art of a topic etc.).

Obviously, like academic publishing and research in general, book publishing is constantly transforming a hot topic as well as Open Access. Somehow, it seems that there is no link between the two topics although but still these themes are often discussed together. Generally, it seems that the evaluation of books (evaluations) is not scrutinised enough. While there is bibliometric research on book publishing (e.g., [Chi Gorraiz et al., 2013](#)), other aspects of the links between books and evaluations are under-researched. I forward that seem to me of need for conceptual scrutiny: On the one hand, books are often discussed publishers' prestige, thus committing the same errors as focusing on Impact Factor for journal a confounding of Open Access, digitalisation, and prestige when discussing the transformation of book little attention is paid to actual commercial aspects of publishing, including the services a publisher demand of books by the general population or by professionals ([Giménez-Toledo et al., 2019](#)). Third, the scrutiny on what Open Access means and how it can be achieved, i.e. there is a dichotomy between big money with scholarly publishing vs. all scientific output must be immediately freely available to worthwhile discussing whether it would be more advantageous to perceive this as a continuum rather discussion will also have to include reflections on the turn from "pay to read" to "pay to publish" and w

Publishers' Prestige

Scholars publish books to present the outcomes of their research. Most often, research published in books presents projects and complex issues investigated from various perspectives. In many SSH disciplines, books require that the author(s) have spent considerable time and effort on the subject. Similarly, books are an advancement, which also works a little against the books as prestigious research outputs as even a (quasi)book. Still, books serve to prove that the author is an expert on the topic (and PhDs should be their thesis).

However, profiles of publishers and their reputation differ sometimes strongly across disciplines ([Gi Mannana-Rodriguez & Giménez-Toledo, 2018](#)). Books can fulfil different roles; even a differentiation between non-academic books is sometimes difficult to make. Some publishers specialise on specific aspects of books (e.g., communication of research results to the profession in local language vs. having strong editorial input on specific topics in an academic discipline). Evaluations of the books are necessarily different across the functions they fulfil in knowledge dissemination. The publishers' prestige also changes according to what specific function they fulfil in the dissemination process. Therefore, assuming that the scrutiny of evaluation of manuscripts increases by the function of the book seems a contested issue as reputation and evaluation varies across the functions books can take in the dissemination process. What strikes in the discussion of prestige and Open Access is that it seems that prestige is given (that actually also applies to journals but I think the situation regarding journals has changed with experience): a prestigious publisher is a prestigious publisher and a new one is not. However, while prestige is more stable than is functional, prestige is a result of merit. If a reputed publisher consistently publishes good books, its prestige will drop; consequently, if a new publisher appears, consistently publishes good books, it can become a publisher. Therefore, the discussion on OA and prestige seems often to be weird because it is a discussion about change according to practice, as a function of whether the publisher will provide useful services. Finally, in books in evaluations, it is obvious that using the publishers' prestige as a proxy of quality is very problematic for reasons as the Impact Factor: it is an ecological fallacy. Not all books published by a prestigious publisher are good, not all books published by less prestigious publishers are bad.

Open Access and Digitalisation

Another interesting point lacking scrutiny is the non-discrimination of Open Access and Digitalisation. They can happen without Open Access (and that's a point that is indeed undisputed), but there is Open Access which can be made available to the public without digitalisation. Very obviously, digitalisation helps a lot as it makes books (open as well as closed access), furthermore, the change that comes with digitalisation can be used to implement other changes, like Open Access. But confounding the two transformations might lead to a reduction in the impact of Digitalisation and Open Access can take. If this discussion also involves prestige, things become very blurry.

With regard to the SSH, it is interesting that Open Access seems to be conceptualised as "freely available" because the argument is that research is publicly funded, so it should be available to the public. Interestingly, this argument implies that the product "book" is made without any price and that publishers don't do anything. Instead of having

free to anyone, anytime, it might also be considered that research needs to be available to the interested. This would render visible that libraries are a form of Open Access for printed sources. Of course, available for free comes with paying for services the publishers provide. Such services are rarely discussed, and those ready to pay for them are even less discussed. Digitalisation comes with changes in publishing practices, the idea to make research results accessible. Both processes are separate and merit a separate discussion of what we are negotiating. Instead of thinking Open Access rather than Digitalisation, it would be worth discussing Digitalisation and what services are provided by whom, and then what costs come with them. If that things accessible to the relevant audience can be discussed. Basically, after having discussed the changes through digitalisation, we can reconceptualise “Library” with regard to those new ways of publishing. The process of negotiation with publishers.

With regard to the evaluation of books, it seems that it is often perceived that Open Access books are important to acknowledge that Digitalisation and Open Access are not linked to peer review and quality. Rather, books fulfil many different roles in knowledge production and dissemination. They meet different requirements regarding accessibility (both from perspective of digitalisation as well as from open access perspective). For books meant for being printed, some books are clearly meant to be sold, some books might be meant to be sold physically). This also means that the manuscripts should be evaluated regarding their purpose. At the moment when Open Access has become relevant and Digitalisation has become dominant, books are published without having been evaluated by publishers taking advantage of the need of scholars to publish their PhDs or books and require further evaluation. Regardless of Digitalisation and Open Access, it is relevant to distinguish predatory publishing.

Open Access and publishing

This reflection leads straight to the next point: Oftentimes, there is a dichotomy between the good (Open Access for anyone anytime) and the bad (commercial publishers gaining ridiculous amounts of money from publishing). One is put in front of those two options and needs to decide. However, it seems to me more fruitful to understand it as a continuum. There are several ways of making scientific research publicly available. The European Open Access Plan (Plan S) is not the only possible one, and not the first ([Debat & Babini, 2019](#)). The aspect of power was discussed in several meetings on Open Access with EC representatives in which I participated it was made clear by the meeting agenda’s main goal was to regain the central role of Europe in the international research market as Europe has recently lost it. More interestingly, the EC envisages to allow funding for APC also for researchers outside the continent in the context of Horizon Europe (e.g., for a special issue or an edited volume), knowing that “non-discrimination” is a discriminatory. However, the funding is possible under the condition that the research presented (or at least the journal) has “European Values”. While we might agree on the relevance of some basic values like non-discrimination, there are several interesting issues: who controls? which values exactly? What if we want to learn how, for example, research is organised across the world but cannot include contributions from autocratic states because they do not have “European values”? If non-European researchers need the agreement of European funders or even the Commission to publish in European journals, this puts academic freedom quite into question and, ironically, includes a funny definition of a European value “non-discrimination” as well).

Because an important focus lies on keeping Europe on top regarding visible research output, it is not surprising that the current agenda simply moves from a “pay to read” to a “pay to publish” model and that this not necessarily

saves money because the focus is not on the prices for specific services or on monopoly but on who the consumer of the content pays for the distribution ([Armstrong, 2021](#)). It is to be noted that the “pay to publish” is much more difficult to circumvent. There is the idea of waivers applied widely in the book publishing industry. But in many cases, they publish in “special issues” where, for example, one article in five is free for the SSH because SSH scholars usually have smaller funds and special issues can be on the topic of Europe, and many colleagues from Eastern Europe might not be able to get the funds for the Book Process excluded from the special issue, as I had to experience as an editor of such a special issue (see also [Armstrong, 2018](#); [Debat & Babini, 2019](#)).

Another aspect that is not often discussed is that not all research necessarily needs to be available. Research results are presented in a specialised manner only intelligible to specialists; they do not necessarily reach the non-academic audience. Publishing is not just making things available. Publishing consists of several steps: editing, layout, making it available in print or on screen; but it also includes distribution, marketisation, etc. The importance of those aspects of publishing is not to be underestimated but is normally totally ignored. Just that a text is written and available does not mean that the text will be found, read and understood. It must be presented, advertised etc. Not to forget audience-targeted presentation (and that includes writing: a text must not be written in the same way as to specialist peers). Small publishers are often specialised in such a way that they are relevant for SSH disciplines: some SSH research addresses professional practitioners who need to be informed of new research, some address the wider public where even more efforts are needed to reach out. It is also relevant as to whether the research is published in Open Access or for a fee. The pandemic has shown that in reading each research result, quite the opposite: they talked of the cacophony of science because some said A while others said B, so how can both be scientific if A contradicts B? Open Access should not be confined to the wider public. This brings us back to the topic of evaluation: The Open Access agenda puts a lot more emphasis on quantity of research instead of quality of research, quality of presentation and efficient dissemination of research. Research comes with changes as to how research is evaluated for different purposes because the publication process also changes incentives for authors and readers ([Armstrong, 2021](#)). These changes must be part of the Open Access agenda and the focus on availability and prices needs to be expanded to a more holistic idea of the Open Access agenda. Finally, Open Access and Digitalisation also come with potential changes in how to evaluate research. Digitalisation, Open Access, and evaluation needs further scrutiny going beyond printed books equal no printed books open the possibility of “new” open peer review; or the opposite: printed books are prestigious, but one can pay to publish without any quality assurance. The processes are complex, but the issues remain the same: how to deal with technological change; dissemination entails commercial aspects and services change when technological change needs to take changes in publishing, dissemination and the societal needs into account. These are all issues that a clearer separation of the processes would help finding new options.

Conclusions

The evaluation of books undergoes radical changes, not only because the evaluation procedures evolve but also because the book-oriented disciplines of the humanities ([Guillory, 2005](#), p. 34). Rather, publishing as such is at stake. Digitalisation, Open Science and, specifically, Open Access impacts how books are published and disseminated and how they are evaluated. In this short introduction, I have argued that the discourse on Open Access is too narrow.

pay how much for research to be published. The scientific community should engage in a more dissemination of research results to different audiences, the roles publishers can and should take and services should be. The evaluation process of books must be part of this discussion.

The contributions in this session of the conference and its proceedings cannot tackle all those aspects; specialist insights into some selected aspects, i.e. Open Access, reputation and evaluation; peer review opportunities, risks and limitations of Open Access in the humanities.

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