

Evaluation of Books: Introduction

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ABSTRACT

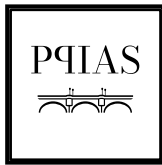
Evaluation of Social Sciences and Humanities in Europe. Hcéres Colloquium Proceedings - Paris IAS, 16-17 May 2022. Session 1

Context

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

So, by reflecting on how books are evaluated today and in the past, in different roles of the book in scientific communication, what are ways how a book is communicated, how are peers reading and assessing those books. We might also identify different publishers, authors and reviewers (e.g., books for career advancements, books to be used in teaching, etc.) of works into a coherent bigger picture, books to present the state of the art of a field.

Obviously, like academic publishing and research in general, book publishing is a hot topic as well as Open Access. Somehow, it seems that there is no link between them but still these themes are often discussed together. Generally, it seems that the evaluation of books (and evaluations) is not scrutinised enough. While there is bibliometric research on books ([Gorraiz et al., 2013](#)), other aspects of the links between books and evaluations are not taken forward that seem to me of need for conceptual scrutiny: On the one hand, books are used to promote publishers' prestige, thus committing the same errors as focusing on Impact Factor. On the other hand, the confounding of Open Access, digitalisation, and prestige when discussing the evaluation of books. A little attention is paid to actual commercial aspects of publishing, including the demand of books by the general population or by professionals ([Giménez-Toledo et al., 2019](#)). The scrutiny on what Open Access means and how it can be achieved, i.e. there is a difference between money with scholarly publishing vs. all scientific output must be immediately taken into account.



worthwhile discussing whether it would be more advantageous to perceive the discussion will also have to include reflections on the turn from “pay to read” to

Publishers’ Prestige

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

However, profiles of publishers and their reputation differ sometimes strongly ([Mannana-Rodriguez & Giménez-Toledo, 2018](#)). Books can fulfil different roles; non-academic books is sometimes difficult to make. Some publishers specialise (e.g., communication of research results to the profession in local language vs. specific topics in an academic discipline). Evaluations of the books are necessary to fulfil in knowledge dissemination. The publishers’ prestige also changes according to the dissemination process. Therefore, assuming that the scrutiny of evaluation of merit seems a contested issue as reputation and evaluation varies across the function of dissemination process. What strikes in the discussion of prestige and Open Access (that actually also applies to journals but I think the situation regarding experience): a prestigious publisher is a prestigious publisher and a new one is not and is more stable than is functional, prestige is a result of merit. If a publisher’s prestige will drop; consequently, if a new publisher appears, consistently published by a publisher. Therefore, the discussion on OA and prestige seems often to be weird. It changes according to practice, as a function of whether the publisher will provide books in evaluations, it is obvious that using the publishers’ prestige as a proxy for reasons as the Impact Factor: it is an ecological fallacy. 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. It can happen without Open Access (and that’s a point that is indeed undisputed), but it can be made available to the public without digitalisation. Very obviously, digitalisation (open as well as closed access), furthermore, the change that comes with digitalisation and other changes, like Open Access. But confounding the two transformations might be misleading. Digitalisation and Open Access can take. If this discussion also involves prestige



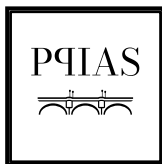
With regard to the SSH, it is interesting that Open Access seems to be conceptualised. The main argument is that research is publicly funded, so it should be available to the public.

that the product “book” is made without any price and that publishers don’t do it for free to anyone, anytime, it might also be considered that research needs to be available. This would render visible that libraries are a form of Open Access for printed books. If research is available for free comes with paying for services the publishers provide. Such services are ready to pay for them are even less discussed. Digitalisation comes with the idea to make research results accessible. Both processes are separate and merit what we are negotiating. Instead of thinking Open Access rather than Digitalisation, we should think Digitalisation and what services are provided by whom, and then what costs can be discussed. Basically, after going through digitalisation, we can reconceptualise “Library” with regard to those new conditions of negotiation with publishers.

With regard to the evaluation of books, it seems that it is often perceived that it is important to acknowledge that Digitalisation and Open Access are not linked. Rather, books fulfil many different roles in knowledge production and distribution. Requirements regarding accessibility (both from perspective of digitalisation as well as from perspective of being printed, some books are clearly meant to be sold, some books are meant to be physically accessible). This also means that the manuscripts should be evaluated regarding their role. Open Access has become relevant and Digitalisation has become dominant, but we have been publishers taking advantage of the need of scholars to publish their research. Further evaluation. Regardless of Digitalisation and Open Access, it is relevant to think about publishing.

Open Access and publishing

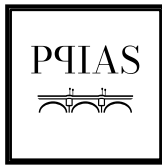
This reflection leads straight to the next point: Oftentimes, there is a dichotomy between the good (research is available to anyone anytime) and the bad (commercial publishers gaining ridiculous amounts of money). One is put in front of those two options and needs to decide. However, it seems to me that there is a continuum. There are several ways of making scientific research publicly available. Open Access (Plan S) is not the only possible one, and not the first ([Debat & Babini, 2019](#)). I participated in several meetings on Open Access with EC representatives in which I participated



agenda's main goal was to regain the central role of Europe in the international research agenda recently. More interestingly, the EC envisages to allow funding for APC also for the context of Horizon Europe (e.g., for a special issue or an edited volume) which is not discriminatory. However, the funding is possible under the condition that the research must promote "European Values". While we might agree on the relevance of some basic values, there are several interesting issues: who controls? which values exactly? What if we want to include research from all over the world but cannot include contributions from autocratic regimes? If non-European researchers need the agreement of European funders to publish in European journals, this puts academic freedom quite into question and, ironically, includes the European value "non-discrimination" as well).

Because an important focus lies on keeping Europe on top regarding visible research, the current agenda simply moves from a "pay to read" to a "pay to publish" model. This saves money because the focus is not on the prices for specific services or on the fact that the consumer of the content pays for the distribution ([Armstrong, 2021](#)). It is to be expected that it will be difficult to circumvent for researchers: a mail to the author was usually all it needed to get published, but "pay to publish" is much more difficult to circumvent. There is the idea of waivers applied to certain publishers. But in many cases, they publish in "special issues" where, for example, for the SSH because SSH scholars usually have smaller funds and special issues are more expensive. In Europe, and many colleagues from Eastern Europe might not be able to get their work published in the special issue, as I had to experience as an editor of such a special issue. The role of political power and control of Plan S is discussed and seen much more critically ([Debat & Babini, 2019](#)).

Another aspect that is not often discussed is that not all research necessarily needs to be presented in a specialised manner only intelligible to specialist audiences. Publishing is not just making things available. Publishing includes editing, layout, making it available in print or on screen; but it also includes distribution, marketing, etc. The importance of those aspects of publishing is not to be underestimated because a text is written and available does not mean that the text will be found, read, presented, advertised etc. Not to forget audience-targeted presentation (and that this is not written in the same way as to specialist peers). Small publishers are also relevant for SSH disciplines: some SSH research addresses professional practitioners, some address the wider public where even more efforts are needed. It is relevant as to whether the research is published in Open Access or for a fee. The problem is in reading each research result, quite the opposite: they talked of the cacophony of voices while others said B, so how can both be scientific if A contradicts B? Open Access is not the answer to the wider public. This brings us back to the topic of evaluation: The Open Access movement focuses on research instead of quality of research, quality of presentation and efficient communication. This comes with changes as to how research is evaluated for different purposes because the focus also changes incentives for authors and readers ([Armstrong, 2021](#)). These changes in Open Access and the focus on availability and prices needs to be expanded to a much broader context. Finally, Open Access and Digitalisation also come with potential



Digitalisation, Open Access, and evaluation needs further scrutiny going beyond Open Access books open the possibility of “new” open peer review; or the opposite: are just pay for publish without any quality assurance. The processes are complex changes with technological change; dissemination entails commercial aspects evaluation needs to take changes in publishing, dissemination and the societal needs and a clearer separation of the processes would help finding new options.

Conclusions

The evaluation of books undergoes radical changes, not only because the evaluation of the book-oriented disciplines of the humanities (Guillory, 2005, p. 34). Rather, with Digitalisation, Open Science and, specifically, Open Access impacts how books are evaluated. In this short introduction, I have argued that the discourse on Open Access pay how much for research to be published. The scientific community should consider dissemination of research results to different audiences, the roles publishers can play 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 provide specialist insights into some selected aspects, i.e. Open Access, reputation management, opportunities, risks and limitations of Open Access in the humanities.

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