

# 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 the humanities. As reported in the previous session, therefore, books need to play a role in research evaluation in order to provide meaningful results. This opens the next question: how, then, are books evaluated? There are several reasons: First, evaluation is a time-consuming activity (if it is done properly) and, therefore, to avoid this, one could benefit from taking into account the evaluation used during the publication process. Second, evaluating and studying how books are evaluated by those who publish them means benefiting from a few lessons learned from evaluating books.

So, by reflecting on how books are evaluated today and in the past, in different contexts, we are going to explore the roles of the book in scientific communication, what are ways how a book is constructed, how are publishers and how are peers reading and assessing those books. We might also identify different types of books and their publishers, authors and reviewers (e.g., books for career advancements, books to a wider audience, books that put a lot 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 and is a hot topic as well as Open Access. Somehow, it seems that there is no link between the two topics but still these themes are often discussed together. Generally, it seems that the evaluation of books (and book evaluations) is not scrutinised enough. While there is bibliometric research on book publishing (e.g., [Gorraiz et al., 2013](#)), other aspects of the links between books and evaluations are under-researched. I would like to put forward that there seems to me to be a need for conceptual scrutiny: On the one hand, books are often discussed in terms of publishers' prestige, thus committing the same errors as focusing on Impact Factor for journals. On the other hand, the confounding of Open Access, digitalisation, and prestige when discussing the transformation of book publishing gets little attention is paid to actual commercial aspects of publishing, including the services a publisher provides, the demand of books by the general population or by professionals ([Giménez-Toledo et al., 2019](#)). Third, there is a lack of scrutiny on what Open Access means and how it can be achieved, i.e. there is a dichotomy between money with scholarly publishing vs. all scientific output must be immediately freely available. Finally, while worthwhile discussing whether it would be more advantageous to perceive this as a continuum between "pay to read" and "pay to publish", the discussion will also have to include reflections on the turn from "pay to read" to "pay to publish" and back.

## Publishers' Prestige

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

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

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

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

With regard to the evaluation of books, it seems that it is often perceived that Open Access is not important to acknowledge that Digitalisation and Open Access are not linked to peer review and quality control. Rather, books fulfil many different roles in knowledge production and dissemination. They have different requirements regarding accessibility (both from perspective of digitalisation as well as from open access perspective). Some books are clearly meant to be sold, some books might be meant to be made available (e.g., for being printed, some books are clearly meant to be sold, some books might be meant to be made available 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 with different purposes. Publishers have been taking advantage of the need of scholars to publish their PhDs or books and are not open to further evaluation. Regardless of Digitalisation and Open Access, it is relevant to distinguish pre-digital publishing from digital publishing.

## Open Access and publishing

This reflection leads straight to the next point: Oftentimes, there is a dichotomy between the good (research being free for anyone anytime) and the bad (commercial publishers gaining ridiculous amounts of money from research). One is put in front of those two options and needs to decide. However, it seems to me more fruitful to think of a continuum. There are several ways of making scientific research publicly available. The European Union (Plan S) is not the only possible one, and not the first ([Debat & Babini, 2019](#)). The aspect of peer review was on the agenda of several meetings on Open Access with EC representatives in which I participated it was made clear that the main goal was to regain the central role of Europe in the international research market as Europe has recently. More interestingly, the EC envisages to allow funding for APC also for researchers outside Europe in the context of Horizon Europe (e.g., for a special issue or an edited volume), knowing that this is discriminatory. However, the funding is possible under the condition that the research presented must have “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 the consumer of the content pays for the distribution ([Armstrong, 2021](#)). It is to be noted that the “pay to circumvent for researchers: a mail to the author was usually all it needed to receive a copy of the publish” is much more difficult to circumvent. There is the idea of waivers applied widely in the publishers. But in many cases, they publish in “special issues” where, for example, one article in favour for the SSH because SSH scholars usually have smaller funds and special issues can be on the top in Europe, and many colleagues from Eastern Europe might not be able to get the funds for the Book 1 excluded from the special issue, as I had to experience as an editor of such a special issue (see also of political power and control of Plan S is discussed and seen much more critically outside Europe [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 need to be available to the non-academic audience. Publishing is not just making things available. Publishing consists of 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 underestimated. That a text is written and available does not mean that the text will be found, read and understood. It needs to be presented, advertised etc. Not to forget audience-targeted presentation (and that includes writing: a text should not be written in the same way as to specialist peers). Small publishers are often specialised in specific fields relevant for SSH disciplines: some SSH research addresses professional practitioners who need to be updated with new research, some address the wider public where even more efforts are needed to reach out to the relevant audience as whether the research is published in Open Access or for a fee. The pandemic has shown in reading each research result, quite the opposite: they talked of the cacophony of science because while others said B, so how can both be scientific if A contradicts B? Open Access should not be limited only to the wider public. This brings us back to the topic of evaluation: The Open Access agenda puts a focus on availability instead of quality of research, quality of presentation and efficient dissemination of 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 and the focus on availability and prices needs to be expanded to a more holistic idea of what Open Access brings. 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 to digital books open the possibility of “new” open peer review; or the opposite: printed books are prestigious and one has to pay for publish without any quality assurance. The processes are complex, but the issues remain the same with technological change; dissemination entails commercial aspects and services change when the focus needs to take changes in publishing, dissemination and the societal needs into account. These are 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 changing with Digitalisation, Open Science and, specifically, Open Access impacts how books are published 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 dissemination of research results to different audiences, the roles publishers can and should take and the 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; perspectives, opportunities, risks and limitations of Open Access in the humanities.

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