



# Evaluation of Books: Introduction

Ochsner, Michael

PUBLICATION DATE

5/16/2022

ABSTRACT

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

## 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. The goal of this session is 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, understanding and studying how books are evaluated by those who publish them means benefiting from a few years of evaluating books.

So, by reflecting on how books are evaluated today and in the past, in different contexts, we can explore the roles of the book in scientific communication, what are ways how a book is constructed, how are books read, how are peers reading and assessing those books. We might also identify different types of books, different 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. It 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 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 will move forward that seem to me of 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.

confounding of Open Access, digitalisation, and prestige when discussing the transformation of publishing. 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](#)). The lack of scrutiny on what Open Access means and how it can be achieved, i.e. there is a dichotomy between Open Access and money with scholarly publishing vs. all scientific output must be immediately freely available. It is worthwhile discussing whether it would be more advantageous to perceive this as a continuous process. This discussion will also have to include reflections on the turn from “pay to read” to “pay to publish”.

## Publishers' Prestige

Scholars publish books to present the outcomes of their research. Most often, research publishing is about complex projects and complex issues investigated from various perspectives. In many SSH disciplines, books are published because the author(s) have spent considerable time and effort on the subject. Similarly, books are published as a sign of advancement, which also works a little against the books as prestigious research outputs and as (quasi)books. Still, books serve to prove that the author is an expert on the topic (and PhDs show 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 between academic and 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 editorial boards on specific topics in an academic discipline). Evaluations of the books are necessarily different according to their role in knowledge dissemination. The publishers' prestige also changes according to what specific role they fulfil in the dissemination process. Therefore, assuming that the scrutiny of evaluation of manuscripts increases over time 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 to be taken for granted (that actually also applies to journals but I think the situation regarding journals has changed with my experience): a prestigious publisher is a prestigious publisher and a new one is not. However, value is more stable than is functional, prestige is a result of merit. If a reputed publisher consistently publishes bad books, its prestige will drop; consequently, if a new publisher appears, consistently publishes good books, it will become a prestigious publisher. Therefore, the discussion on OA and prestige seems often to be weird because it is a discussion that changes according to practice, as a function of whether the publisher will provide useful services. In the books in evaluations, it is obvious that using the publishers' prestige as a proxy of quality is not a good reason 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. It is often argued that Open Access can happen without Open Access (and that's a point that is indeed undisputed), but there is Open Access. Open Access can be made available to the public without digitalisation. Very obviously, digitalisation helps a lot in making research results accessible (open as well as closed access), furthermore, the change that comes with digitalisation can be seen as a complement to other changes, like Open Access. But confounding the two transformations might lead to a reduction in the benefits of both. Digitalisation and Open Access can take. If this discussion also involves prestige, things become very complicated.

With regard to the SSH, it is interesting that Open Access seems to be conceptualised as “freely available to all”. The underlying argument is that research is publicly funded, so it should be available to the public. Interestingly, the idea is that the product “book” is made without any price and that publishers don't do anything. Instead of making research free to anyone, anytime, it might also be considered that research needs to be available to the interested audience. This would render visible that libraries are a form of Open Access for printed sources. Of course, research results are 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. The idea to make research results accessible. Both processes are separate and merit a separate discussion. It is not clear what we are negotiating. Instead of thinking Open Access rather than Digitalisation, it would be better to think about Digitalisation and what services are provided by whom, and then what costs come with them. In this context, what things accessible to the relevant audience can be discussed. Basically, after having discussed the changes brought about through digitalisation, we can reconceptualise “Library” with regard to those new ways of publishing and the new forms of negotiation with publishers.

With regard to the evaluation of books, it seems that it is often perceived that Open Access is a prerequisite for evaluation. It is important to acknowledge that Digitalisation and Open Access are not linked to peer review. Rather, books fulfil many different roles in knowledge production and dissemination. The evaluation of books should take into account requirements regarding accessibility (both from perspective of digitalisation as well as from open access). Some books are meant for being printed, some books are clearly meant to be sold, some books might be meant to be available online (physically). This also means that the manuscripts should be evaluated regarding their purpose. In the context of Open Access has become relevant and Digitalisation has become dominant, books are published and evaluated. It has been publishers taking advantage of the need of scholars to publish their PhDs or books. The evaluation of books should be further evaluation. Regardless of Digitalisation and Open Access, it is relevant to distinguish between different types of publishing.

## Open Access and publishing

This reflection leads straight to the next point: Oftentimes, there is a dichotomy between the good (research being made available for anyone anytime) and the bad (commercial publishers gaining ridiculous amounts of money from this). The EC 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 Open Access (Plan S) is not the only possible one, and not the first ([Debat & Babini, 2019](#)). The aspect of the agenda of several meetings on Open Access with EC representatives in which I participated it was made clear that the agenda's main goal was to regain the central role of Europe in the international research market as it has been 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 might be discriminatory. However, the funding is possible under the condition that the research presented must reflect "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 share our values? If non-European researchers need the agreement of European funders or even the Committee on Open Access 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 only saves money because the focus is not on the prices for specific services or on monopoly but on the fact that 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 for researchers: a mail to the author was usually all it needed to receive a copy of the article. "Pay to publish" is much more difficult to circumvent. There is the idea of waivers applied widely in the past by some publishers. But in many cases, they publish in "special issues" where, for example, one article is included for the SSH because SSH scholars usually have smaller funds and special issues can be on the agenda of Horizon Europe, and many colleagues from Eastern Europe might not be able to get the funds for the Book of Abstracts. Excluded from the special issue, as I had to experience as an editor of such a special issue (see also [Debat & Babini, 2018](#); [Debat & Babini, 2019](#)). The role of political power and control of Plan S is discussed and seen much more critically outside Europe ([Debat & Babini, 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 reach the non-academic audience. Publishing is not just making things available. Publishing consists of writing, 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 but is normally forgotten. The fact 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 for a specific audience, not be written in the same way as to specialist peers). Small publishers are often specialised in a specific field.

relevant for SSH disciplines: some SSH research addresses professional practitioners who need of new research, some address the wider public where even more efforts are needed to reach relevant 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 to the wider public. This brings us back to the topic of evaluation: The Open Access agenda put research instead of quality of research, quality of presentation and efficient dissemination of comes with changes as to how research is evaluated for different purposes because the publication also changes incentives for authors and readers ([Armstrong, 2021](#)). These changes must be paid. Open Access and the focus on availability and prices needs to be expanded to a more holistic idea of Open Access brings. Finally, Open Access and Digitalisation also come with potential changes in how to Digitalisation, Open Access, and evaluation needs further scrutiny going beyond printed books equal books open the possibility of “new” open peer review; or the opposite: printed book are prestigious pay for publish without any quality assurance. The processes are complex, but the issues remain with technological change; dissemination entails commercial aspects and services change where needs to take changes in publishing, dissemination and the societal needs into account. These 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 the book-oriented disciplines of the humanities ([Guillory, 2005](#), p. 34). Rather, publishing as such Digitalisation, Open Science and, specifically, Open Access impacts how books are published and are evaluated. In this short introduction, I have argued that the discourse on Open Access is too 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 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 specialist insights into some selected aspects, i.e. Open Access, reputation and evaluation; opportunities, risks and limitations of Open Access in the humanities.

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