

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 part of the humanities. As reported in the previous session, therefore, books need to play a role in evaluation. The first question in 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 process. Second, 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 contexts, the 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 types of publishers, authors and reviewers (e.g., books for career advancements, books to present new 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 book publishing and Open Access 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 (e.g., [Gorraiz et al., 2013](#)), other aspects of the links between books and evaluations need to be brought forward that seem to me of need for conceptual scrutiny: On the one hand, books are often evaluated on 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., 2020](#)). The discussion on what Open Access means and how it can be achieved, i.e. there is a tension between the money with scholarly publishing vs. all scientific output must be immediately available. It is worthwhile discussing whether it would be more advantageous to perceive the evaluation of books as a 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, these are large projects and complex issues investigated from various perspectives. In many cases, it is clear that the author(s) have spent considerable time and effort on the subject. This is a sign of advancement, which also works a little against the books as prestigious references (quasi)books. Still, books serve to prove that the author is an expert on the topic (the topic of their thesis).

However, profiles of publishers and their reputation differ sometimes strongly (Mannana-Rodriguez & Giménez-Toledo, 2018). Books can fulfil different roles; for example, 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 for 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 good 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 is not the same as 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 as an argument is that research is publicly funded, so it should be available to the public. But that the product "book" is made without any price and that publishers don't do a

free to anyone, anytime, it might also be considered that research needs to be available to anyone anytime. This would render visible that libraries are a form of Open Access for printed books. The idea that research results are 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 digitalisation, we can reconceptualise “Library” with regard to those needs 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 read physically). This also means that the manuscripts should be evaluated regarding their role in knowledge production. 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 evaluate publishing.

Open Access and publishing

This reflection leads straight to the next point: Oftentimes, there is a dichotomy between the good (research results are 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. Plan S is not the only possible one, and not the first ([Debat & Babini, 2019](#)). In several meetings on Open Access with EC representatives in which I participate, the agenda's main goal was to regain the central role of Europe in the international research landscape. Recently, the EC envisages to allow funding for APC also for non-EU researchers in the context of Horizon Europe (e.g., for a special issue or an edited volume). This is not discriminatory. However, the funding is possible under the condition that the research is in line with “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 have research results organised across 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).

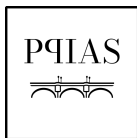
Because an important focus lies on keeping Europe on top regarding visible research results, the current agenda simply moves from a “pay to read” to a “pay to publish” model.

saves money because the focus is not on the prices for specific services or (the) consumer of the content pays for the distribution ([Armstrong, 2021](#)). It is to be circumvented for researchers: a mail to the author was usually all it needed to “publish” is much more difficult to circumvent. There is the idea of waivers applied by 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 in Europe, and many colleagues from Eastern Europe might not be able to get the article excluded from 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 ([2018](#); [Debat & Babini, 2019](#)).

Another aspect that is not often discussed is that not all research necessarily research results are presented in a specialised manner only intelligible to specialists, but also to the non-academic audience. Publishing is not just making things available. Publishing includes editing, layout, making it available in print or on screen; but it also includes distribution, etc. The importance of those aspects of publishing is not to be underestimated because that 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 a text should not be written in the same way as to specialist peers). Small publishers are also relevant for SSH disciplines: some SSH research addresses professional practitioners, some of new research, some address the wider public where even more efforts are needed to be relevant as 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 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. It comes with changes as to how research is evaluated for different purposes because it 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 more holistic view of what Open Access brings. Finally, Open Access and Digitalisation also come with potential challenges. Digitalisation, Open Access, and evaluation needs further scrutiny going beyond books open the possibility of “new” open peer review; or the opposite: printed books do not pay for publish without any quality assurance. The processes are complex, but with technological change; dissemination entails commercial aspects and service aspects. Needs to take changes in publishing, dissemination and the societal needs into account. Clearer separation of the processes would help finding new options.

Conclusions

The evaluation of books undergoes radical changes, not only because the evaluation of books but also 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 disseminate research results to different audiences, the roles publishers can play and the services they should provide. 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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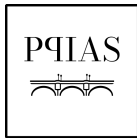
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