

Open Access in the Humanities: the way ahead

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ABSTRACT

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If you are following, even not very closely, the world of scholarly publishing, you must have heard of Open Access: presses offering books or papers for free download under a copyright licence allowing different degrees of further reuse or republication. The key question is: who is going to pay the publisher's costs to make the texts available? Recent initiatives (like Coalition S) are bringing about new agreements between funding bodies and major international publishers. In many countries it is already a common practice among researchers to budget the cost of publishing open access in their grant proposals, so that they can pay the publishers directly whenever their texts are accepted. However, this limits research to those with the standing and luck to actually get research funding in an increasingly tight market: on such models open access potentially becomes the realm of the privileged and well-funded.

Open Access in the Humanities needs a different publication model. Many scientific disciplines are in an era of big budgets focused on mainstream research programmes. Philosophy, our own field, exemplifies a more common scenario across the Humanities: it is comparatively more diverse and institutionally small than most natural sciences. As compared to most sciences, humanists don't agree on very much, but much of our research is comparatively not expensive. For instance, a typical European research grant in philosophy provides around 2000EUR per researcher/year towards conference

travelling or a laptop, expecting a couple of publications in return. The costs of publishing a book with a major international press is in the realm of 10-15,000 British pounds. That's a few years' research funding! And we cannot expect our funding bodies to raise the amount of the grants philosophers receive just because they want to publish Open Access. The way things are going, soon there will be an elite of well-funded philosophers publishing open access with everybody else hiding behind a paywall.

The solution, in our view, is within grasp of most humanistic disciplines. Most of us publish with local public university presses. However, many of these presses lack the prestige of international publishers, because the review process is managed locally. But prestige is something that ultimately depends on the scholars who lead the field. This is how BSPS Open was born: the British Society for Philosophy of Science (BSPS) has joined forces with Calgary University Press to launch an open access monographs series at no cost for authors. Calgary will generously fund 10 volumes in the next five years while the BSPS guarantees the excellence of the review process.

BSPS Open ¹ sets a paradigm for open access publication: a partnership between the leading societies in every field of the humanities and local university presses, so that the former signal to the whole world the quality of the review process and the latter make the outcome available at no cost for authors. Our vision is that humanists all over the world should mobilize their local resources with a global open access ambition. Many university presses are now publishing conventional for-profit monographs with financial losses and not much circulation. There is much to be gained if part of those budgets was used to fund open access publications under the supervision of international boards that would give it intellectual credit and visibility. Also, scholarly societies would reclaim their institutional independence and public service mission, gaining some distance from the self-serving interests of commercial publishers. These partnerships between university presses and scholarly societies would be then able to apply for public funds aimed at the promotion of open access, with better credentials than most commercial publishers. In a world where predatory publication schemes are rampant, shouldn't the taxpayer trust non-profit initiatives where only scholarly criteria rule?

Now that every author can post manuscripts on repositories and personal websites, it is time to concentrate public budgets on promoting the best research in every field of the

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Humanities, according to its own disciplinary standards. If humanists choose to exclusively trust mainstream international publishers, it is likely to become a less diverse field where most scholars will, at best, remain hidden behind paywalls. If scholarly societies invest instead in partnerships promoting excellence with local publishers, we have a chance to make this excellent research widely available and keep the humanities thriving into the future.

Now, how book proposals should be assessed within this framework? Since our budget is limited -again, ten books in five years-, our editorial model implies a very stringent manuscript selection process that will predictably lead to the rejection of very good book proposals. We have adopted a deliberative model in which the series editors and the editorial board should proceed in two stages. The manuscript evaluation is conducted as if our series was a journal, with one of the 20 members of our editorial board acting as associate editors to decide whether manuscripts should be sent for review. If the reviews are positive, the manuscript selection is consulted with the entire board, making sure that we all agree on the relevance of the manuscript for our community and, therefore, the decision to fund its publication.

The entire editorial body of BSPS Open is appointed by the British Society for Philosophy of Science. The goal is to achieve for our book series the same scholarly quality that the society's journal and annual conference already enjoy. In other words, the prestige associated to a publication in the series should come from the sponsoring society, not the individual editors or the publisher.

Our first book just came out in January 2022, and ultimately the prestige of our series will just be the success of our monographs. But it may take years for books to take off, and we need to attract the best authors now while persuading all the relevant committees (tenure, promotion, funding) that publishing with us is worth their credit. We hope our evaluation model will make the difference. Again, diamond open access may create perverse incentives for commercial publishers that may be tempted to lower their publication standards to secure the publication fees. A scholarly society that sanctions the quality of the editorial process without receiving any royalties from the publisher signals that publication on the basis of intellectual merit is still the way ahead.

Footnotes

1 : See <https://www.thebsps.org/bsps-open/>. Email: bspsopen@thebsps.org↵