

Peer Review in Scholarly Book Publishing

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ABSTRACT

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This paper will present a matter that is close to my heart and has been part of my professional life for twenty years, namely the peer review process of academic books. The process which has as its primary goal to ensure that the content of the book is scientifically sound. But ideally peer review should also ensure that the book manuscript is improved because of the comments and suggestions made by the fellow peers undertaking the review.

I began my career in scholarly book publishing almost twenty years ago when I joined Museum Tusculanum Press in Copenhagen, Denmark. A scholarly press directed by a scholar herself publishing high-quality books in many different languages. The press was founded in 1975 by classical philologists and then slowly expanded to capture most of the humanities and social sciences, publishing around sixty books and ten journals annually.

Peer review was a cornerstone of the press. Every incoming manuscript would be read by a qualified editor and discussed at an editorial meeting. If the manuscript seemed sound and the topic was within the profile of the press, then the next step would be to find qualified, external experts to undertake the peer review. That was no trivial exercise. It required a great network, understanding of the disciplines and the scholarly landscape, and persuasion skills. The latter because it is utterly time-consuming to review a book manuscript of hundreds of pages and sometimes even more than a

thousand pages (with no direct reward other than a few books, the acknowledgement by the publisher and your peers who (ideally) would do the same if they were asked).

Scholarly books often cover quite niche topics. And are perhaps written in a local language. The pool of potential reviewers for a book on, let's say, drinking and eating habits in rural 19th century Denmark written in Danish is limited. Consequently, it would be close to impossible to prevent the reviewer from knowing the identity of the author and typically also vice-versa. So, double-blind peer review would almost certainly be impossible and single-blind peer review often, too. But was that a problem to us? Mostly not. Sometimes it would actually be a benefit.

It did happen now and then that the reviewer, having provided us with comments and suggestions, would follow the finalisation of the editorial process like a consultant. With the intention of ensuring the highest possible quality of the published manuscript. Such a collaborative process was mutually rewarding and – I think – to the good of the scholarly community. Of course, this was not standard practise but in fact there was no standard way of doing things. It would depend on the manuscript, the topic, the disciplinary context etc. However, there were firm principles of which the most important was that the review had to be performed by external experts. We were aware of some university presses who would receive manuscripts from distinguished professors and therefore assume that the manuscript was of high quality. This was indeed not always the case, was our experience!

The principle of external peer review is also a cornerstone of the organisation that I oversee today. The OAPEN Foundation operates two platforms for open access, peer reviewed academic books: The OAPEN Library which hosts, distributes, and preserves over 20,000 books from more than 400 publishers and the Directory of Open Access Books which is a global index of more than 50,000 open access, peer reviewed books. We evaluate publishers before agreeing to include their books. We do this based on their peer review practice, their licensing policy, and their publishing profile. It is not an easy task since the diversity of practise is considerable across the continents.

We already realised this when we first built the OAPEN Library. This work began in 2008 as a European co-funded e-content plus project by six European university presses and two universities.

Museum Tusculanum Press was one of the partners and it was exciting to work closely with fellow publishers from Amsterdam, Lyon, Firenze, Manchester, and Göttingen and to discuss our publishing practises including peer review. Immediately it was clear to me that we differed in our procedures although were united in our ambition to achieve high quality books. It was indeed inspiring to experience bibliodiversity in practise. I am grateful that I last year got the chance to join OAPEN again which – based on growth and usage – seems to me a clear success although fundraising remains an issue.

The Directory of Open Access Books (DOAB) was an idea we already created during the OAPEN project. We wanted to develop a service for books like what DOAJ does for journals. So, with some help from DOAJ, DOAB went live in 2012. Some years later DOAB became its own legal entity – a non-profit foundation like OAPEN – owned and managed by OAPEN and OpenEdition (CNRS and Aix-Marseille University). Therefore, today Pierre Mounier and I manage DOAB jointly. DOAB is a fast-growing service. Every week we receive new applications from publishers around the world who want to have their open access, peer reviewed books indexed. We work with many publishers in Europe, North and South America, but would like to see more publishers from Asia and Africa.

As you can imagine the diversity of publishing cultures and peer review procedures is considerable across the Globe. Which is natural, of course, and not to be changed. We stand firm on our principle of external peer review but are flexible and forthcoming on other parameters to ensure diversity, equity, and inclusion.

We don't believe in one, uniform way to practise peer review. Instead, we believe that displaying the quality assurance procedure is a way to cast light on what is perceived as a black box by many. Particularly for open access books, focus on the quality aspect is important to bust the myth that open access books should be of lower quality than non-open access books. Adding transparency to the peer review process is the idea behind our new DOAB service which we call 'Peer Review Information Service for Monographs' – PRISM <https://doabooks.org/en/publishers/prism>. The service has been tested with publishers of different size and shape and just after summer we will be ready to roll it out to all the publishers in DOAB.

The core idea of PRISM is that we provide the publishers with an opportunity to give information about their peer review procedure based on a standardised set of questions like, when is the peer review being performed, what is reviewed, by whom, what level of openness is involved, and who oversees the process. The publisher ticks the appropriate boxes which then creates a DOAB PRISM label that is attached to the publisher and to the relevant books that fit with the description. Different procedures can be applied to different books and or book series. The label is a small, hyper-linked icon that displays the information provided by the publisher. This information is then also part of the metadata of the book.

Now, you may wonder how such a standardised format fits with what I previously said about diversity. Of course, it doesn't fit well. But we do give publishers an opportunity to add natural language to the description to accommodate to the many shades of peer review. Secondly, we believe that PRISM is just one step on a long journey towards more transparency and openness around the evaluation of book manuscripts. We have been fortunate to engage a Scientific Committee of excellent experts from around the World to help guiding us through-out the journey. Surely, we have embarked on an adventure and as with all adventures there will be challenges and obstacles along the way, but it will be exciting! By giving the publishers an opportunity to provide information about their evaluation mechanisms and by displaying and distributing that information we hope to increase trust in open access book publishing and more broadly around scholarly communication. Thank you very much for your attention.