

Knowledge Unlatched, failed transparency, and the commercialisation of open access book publishing



Over recent years, Knowledge Unlatched has harnessed the effectiveness of its consortial funding model to become the largest gatekeeper to open access for scholarly books. But as **Marcel Knöchelmann** describes, the changing of its status from that of a community interest company to a German GmbH or public limited company, and that it is now fully owned by the consultancy fullstopp, has gone largely uncommunicated. This information has assumed greater pertinence and urgency following the decision to appoint fullstopp to collect and analyse data that will be used to inform future policy decisions on open access. The researchers, publishers, and librarians inevitably impacted by the outcomes of this consultation should be afforded the transparency to know that the parent company of the commercial entity which stands to profit from a future of open access book publishing is advising on what the future of open access book publishing in the UK should be.

Note from the author: the developments specified in this post are based on publicly available information. By putting the pieces together, I was worried about the progress of Knowledge Unlatched and its owner's potential conflict of interest in shaping UK higher education policy. As a former employee of Knowledge Unlatched, from 2016 to 2017, I was unsure of how to deal with the information. After contacting former colleagues and relaying my concerns, the company's approach did not change. However, discussions with other academics and scholarly communication experts led me to conclude that I am not alone in having such concerns and that this information should be available for discussion, especially to those who will feel the impact of open access books the most: fellow researchers. I hope this discussion will lead to more transparency regarding the shaping of the future of open access book publishing.

Knowledge Unlatched, founded by Frances Pinter as a community interest company, is often described as a cooperative, an initiative positioned alongside others in the scholarly communications space such as the [Directory of Open Access Books](#) (DOAB) or the [Open Library of Humanities](#). Indeed, its business model is based on a consortial funding model; libraries pay into a fund and Knowledge Unlatched uses this crowdsourced money to make scholarly books open access. This model represented a great way to help libraries and publishers advance open access for monographs – Knowledge Unlatched was the missing bridge in this particular [prisoner's dilemma](#).

Today, though, Knowledge Unlatched is much more than that. It was converted into a German [GmbH](#) (comparable to a British public limited company) based in Berlin and, according to the [official company registry in Germany](#), is now fully owned by the consultancy fullstopp GmbH, which itself is owned by Sven Fund, a former Springer (now SpringerNature) board member. Fund runs both companies and has developed a progressive growth strategy for Knowledge Unlatched, moving away from publishing only books in the humanities and social sciences, towards the inclusion of journals and broadening into STEM disciplines. By now, Knowledge Unlatched is the largest gatekeeper to open access for scholarly books, according to recent numbers from the DOAB and OAPEN, and also the only commercial one. Tax status alone hardly explains the company's conversion to a for-profit, as there is also a community interest version of the GmbH in Germany ([gGmbH](#)). However, the fact it seems set to make a profit is not even the crucial element. The company's influence on the market is.

The future of open access based on a conflict of interest?

In July of this year, Knowledge Unlatched's parent company, fullstopp, was appointed by Research England, Jisc, the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and the British Academy as [the consultancy to conduct a quantitative analysis of the current landscape of book publishing](#). The outcomes of this consultation will provide key evidence to the [Universities UK monograph working group](#) and inform decisions to be made around future open access policy and the Research Excellence Framework. (The full specifications of this appointment can be found on [the Government's web pages](#).)

Those who conduct the analysis under the company name fullstopp are the very same people who run Knowledge Unlatched, as was confirmed to me by fullstopp employees. However, this is not visible to anyone who does not specifically research the background of this job. See, for instance, the “[Publisher Survey](#)” created by fullstopp and distributed by ALPSP to gather data from publishers. The background of fullstopp being the parent company of a key player in open access publishing is not stated at all. Instead, though the consent form states that the data will be stored anonymously, the survey itself requires respondents to provide the name of their publishing house, for unclear purposes. Names – or any other unambiguous identifiers – are not normally required to create an evidence base about a market.

Even if this information were visible, how many of the publishers and universities to be surveyed are realistically aware their surveyor is no longer a community interest company? Legally, this may be entirely appropriate, and those responsible for awarding this consultancy to fullstopp may not have seen a conflict of interest. However, the researchers who will inevitably be impacted by the results of this consultation, as well as publishers and librarians, should be afforded the transparency to know that future policy decisions may be shaped considerably by a commercial agenda; i.e. that the parent company of the commercial entity which stands to profit from a future of open access book publishing is advising on what the future of open access book publishing in the UK should be. But instead there is more secrecy.

Knowledge Unlatched’s market influence

Knowledge Unlatched doesn’t hide its aspirations, declaring its ambition to become the “[central open access platform](#)”. Indeed, the model by which libraries crowdsource the funds to make books open access seems ideal. The problem is, such a model should be in the hands of many and not a single, private owner.

Because of its size, Knowledge Unlatched is already able to shape discussions. The company repeatedly talks about the “OA market” (which points to its aim to commercialise open access), declares that impact is at “[the heart of open access](#)”, and demands more transparency from publishers regarding usage data (even while not actually releasing its own data, revealing it only in customer conversations). Elements such as the funding tool it aims at researchers reduce publishing decisions to a set of metrics that are toxic to the meaningful education of researchers regarding what open access means. Think of the large corporate publishers – the much lamented gatekeepers – who today centralise communication channels. Academia doesn’t need more of such centralisation, especially in disciplines of the humanities where many smaller and distributed publication entities like university presses are important players. Transparency is key to progress in publishing, but transparency is precisely what Knowledge Unlatched has repeatedly failed to demonstrate.

Failed transparency

A major example of this is the company’s failure to clarify that it is no longer a community interest company. Press coverage of the 2016 transition from Frances Pinter to Sven Fund was opaque on this matter, with reports of “[a new German branch of Knowledge Unlatched](#)” to be headed by Fund. The same press coverage stated that the “scheme” was “not-for-profit”. That this transition had taken place and the company is now run for profit [came as news even to experts in the field](#) more than two years later.

Much of what is described above could be explained as somewhat exaggerated business practices. Yet, of greatest concern is the company’s influence on the formation of open access policy in the UK, combined with its secrecy. All stakeholders involved should be granted the transparency to be able to come to their own judgements on how this market is being influenced.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

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