

# Open access book publishing should be community-focused and aim to let diversity thrive, not be driven by a free market paradigm



*The whole reasoning around open access for books is now aligned to a commercial agenda, where authors invest in openness with the prospect of greater downloads, citations, and impact in return. **Marcel Knöchelmann** argues that the free market paradigm is particularly ill-suited to humanities and social sciences book publishing and its many diverse scholarly communities. Equitable foundations for open scholarship should mean having shared infrastructures that support openness, without openness being for sale. We need to radically rethink collaborative efforts to preserve diversity and refocus the intentions of openness on scholarship – requiring a new, community-focused approach.*

That mandating immediate open access for books cannot be funded through book processing charges (BPCs) is [certainly not news](#). But it's not enough to state that BPC-based gold open access is economically unsustainable. The whole reasoning around open access for books has shifted towards returns on investments and now seems aligned to a commercial agenda, one in which the supplier averages costs of a traditional process to come up with a price tag for openness, and where the buyer can invest in this openness and get more "impact" in return. This adds a layer of commercial reasoning to an infrastructure of book publishers more often concerned with value than returns on investments. Alongside this reasoning for commercial, "gold" openness — admittedly somewhat oversimplified here — is its "green" counterpart, where pre-formatted manuscripts are self-archived but often hard to discover.

Clearly, the whole situation is deeply flawed. It's questionable whether merely refining open access policies at this stage makes sense when the supposedly more equitable foundations they are intended to achieve are aligned with a free market paradigm. This may work in the technology-driven scientific journal environment, where such policies can help to remove artificial barriers to access. Indeed, to break up conglomerates here is desirable. But book-focused humanities and social sciences (HSS) publishing is different, for a number of reasons.

## The diversity of HSS book publishing

HSS book publishing has much smaller margins per output. Its market has a long (and lengthening) tail of small publishers. To make a profit is not the objective of many of those smaller publishers—in the case of university presses, they may even be a financially interrelated part of an academic institution. And book programmes are built according to a continuous procedure that is steered by decisions based on qualitative information. A book programme has meaning; imprints represent schools of thought. The diversity of these imprints and their editorial support are integral to the scholarly community — our approach to open access should be based on the idea of letting such diversity thrive, while breaking down economic barriers.

Moreover, the so-called impact argument is particularly erroneous when applied to HSS books. Impact is very hard to define and requires individual judgement (not measurement) — within the scholarly community as well as beyond. Books are foundations of nuance and understanding, even more so in the humanities than in the social sciences. The notion of published material being "new knowledge" is not applicable (accordingly, we should refer to open scholarship rather than [open knowledge](#)).

In addition, there is a [selection bias](#): it may not be gold open access that is responsible for [higher download and citation figures](#), but that the published material itself is of more interest than comparable paywalled publications. Statements about citation and download figures cannot all be attributed to the advantages of the access model. And even if there were some degree of causation behind the download or citation correlation, using this as the decisive rationale for greater openness is the wrong logic. It drives competition, loads more pressure onto researchers, and is detrimental to the foundational principles of openness. If we want researchers to be in favour of more equality through openness, we must argue for and emphasise the collaborative spirit and efforts underpinning it, and similarly celebrate the collaborative achievement.

## Rethinking equitable foundations as a shared infrastructure

Equitable foundations for open scholarship should mean having shared infrastructures that support openness without openness being for sale. We need to radically rethink our collaborative efforts to preserve diversity and refocus the intentions of openness on scholarship; meaning making it more equal, not more competitive.

This requires a new, community-focused approach. Budgets that currently flow into single transactions — whether to purchase “big deals” or to fund a gold OA book, for instance — could be redirected towards collaborative solutions. These budgets may be deposited into a fund, to be used to support open infrastructures. This might include supporting open access book programmes (not to fund individual books, but rather to sustain whole programmes), alleviating discoverability problems around green open access, or helping to define and achieve open access standards. Libraries may also repurpose part of their budgets for internal developments, providing more institutional publishing solutions and helping research staff better understand the complexities of open access. The strategic aim of this community-based diversity would be to move discussion away from the single output-focused financial compensation for openness (exemplified by the BPC) and degrees of impact, and progress towards systematic openness without harming our existing diversity.

### **Building trust instead of the survival of the fittest**

A consortial funding model like the one developed by Knowledge Unlatched might have been ideal for such an approach. But that organisation made itself redundant for such a position when [it ceased to be either scholar-led or community-focused](#). What equitable foundations for open scholarship need is not-for-profit and a dedication to value in HSS book programmes.

Building infrastructures with such a strategy would clearly require trust from all sides of the scholarly communications environment; especially libraries and funders as the providers of budgets, and publishers and service providers as consumers of those budgets. This trust is precisely what new open access policies should aim to build. The [UUK monograph working group](#) must think about how it can best build this trust, rather than setting in place new regulations that will defer to an erroneous concept of a “free market” to provide unsustainable solutions.

*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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### **About the author**

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