

# ScholarLed collaboration: a powerful engine to grow open access publishing



*The rise of open access publishing has created an opportunity for the scholarly community to have greater influence over how the research it produces is disseminated, by enabling the growth of a diverse group of publishers beyond the handful of large, powerful, commercial players currently dominating the academic landscape. **Lucy Barnes** outlines the vision of ScholarLed, a consortium of six academic-led, not-for-profit, open access book publishers, whose members have come together to build open infrastructure, share knowledge and resources, and communicate collectively with institutions, while maintaining independent operations and publishing programmes.*

Open access is having a major impact on scholarly publishing. Increasing numbers of [funding bodies](#), [REFs 2021](#) and 2027, and Europe-wide movements such as the recently announced [Plan S](#), all mandate that research is disseminated via an open access route. Academic publishing is therefore at a crossroads: will it find ways to accommodate this drive towards open access within its existing structures? Or will new systems of research dissemination be developed? And what might those new systems look like?

In response to these questions, [ScholarLed](#), a consortium of six academic-led, not-for-profit, open access book publishers, was formed earlier this year. Members of the [Radical Open Access Collective](#) who worked closely together [as part of the 2017 OpenAIRE project](#), “[New Platforms for Open Access Book Distribution](#)”, we comprise [Mattering Press](#), [MayFly Books](#), [meson press](#), [Open Book Publishers](#), [Open Humanities Press](#), and [punctum books](#). We believe the rise of open access publishing has created an opportunity for the scholarly community to have more influence over the dissemination of the research we produce, by enabling the growth of a diverse group of publishers beyond the small number of large, powerful, commercial players currently dominating the academic landscape.

Individually, members of ScholarLed have had success in developing innovative, cost-effective, and ethical approaches to open access publishing that are responsive to the scholarly community and operate in a sustainable way. But the question is often asked: “how does this scale?” We believe there is potential for powerful expansion in the proliferation of small presses working collaboratively: when taken together, in different constellations, independent, community-driven projects can form a resilient ecosystem to support the scholarly commons. Coming together as ScholarLed allows us to build open infrastructure, share knowledge and resources, amplify our work and our presence among the scholarly community, and communicate collectively with institutions, while maintaining our independence in terms of what we publish and how we operate. We’re pooling our experience to develop open tools, workflows, infrastructures, and processes that support the development of open access publishing as a collaborative endeavour, and which, crucially, can be further adopted by new presses.

## New infrastructure

The consortium is sourcing funding to resolve some of the most pressing barriers preventing small publishers from interfacing with large-scale organisations and processes. Existing infrastructures for the discovery, distribution, and archiving of scholarly books have been designed primarily for commercial, large, non-open access publishers. This often renders them fundamentally inappropriate for open access content and for small scholar-led publishing initiatives operating independently. Building up from a shared catalogue, we are therefore working to streamline processes for the creation of metadata for the consortium and enable better integration of open access titles into library catalogues, drawing on funding secured from OpenAIRE. This has also fed into the creation of an open source collaborative conference presence and bookstand and we are actively exploring how we can better archive multimodal monograph content.

The strength of ScholarLed lies in this collaborative rather than competitive approach, which can support academic-led presses to scale their work both horizontally and vertically, [as described by Janneke Adema and Sam Moore in their recent \*Insights\* article](#). Such collaboration develops resilience among small publishers by overcoming the structural and strategic disadvantages we face, while maintaining our diversity as individual organisations with different approaches to what we publish. This strength and plurality is enabled by an outlook that sees scholarly publishing not as a competitive, commercially-driven enterprise seeking to maximise income, but as a communitarian, non-profit, researcher-led endeavour in the service of the broad and open dissemination of publicly funded research.

## Power and control

This collective and open approach is both practical and ethical. As a group of not-for-profit publishers we have been accused of being anti-profit, but this is not the case: we are against monopoly control of platforms and outlets and in favour of openness about the costs incurred and income derived from scholarly publishing. Researchers, libraries, funders, and universities can then make their own choices about how best to disseminate scholarly work for the good of the academy and society at large. A [recent blog post](#) by one of our members, Open Book Publishers, concerning the new library platform for open access books developed by Knowledge Unlatched, sets out the principal argument that monopoly control of central platforms is inimical to the aims of sustainable, equitable open access to scholarly research; while the development of open tools and platforms offers choice to publishers, libraries, and institutions (both funders and universities) and helps to guard against the monetisation of access to research.

An open, community-led approach is therefore one that protects research output from monopoly control and provides for a variety of needs, rather than offering a one-size-fits-all approach to research dissemination. This is a powerful and effective means of ensuring publishing is responsive to the academy, rather than the platform defining the service or the system determining where the work should be published. The development of open access can unleash new ways of doing and disseminating research – as well as making publicly funded academic work available to all, it can open up the mechanisms of publishing to all members of the global scholarly commons.

Rather than finding a way to fit into existing systems and infrastructures, ScholarLed aims to thoroughly rethink those systems and asks how they might operate differently and more collaboratively, for the benefit of the researchers and learners academic publishing should serve.

*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.*

## About the author

**Lucy Barnes** is an editor at Open Book Publishers, a member of the ScholarLed consortium. She is also completing her PhD at the University of Cambridge, studying nineteenth-century theatrical adaptations of novels and poetry.