

A revolutionary new approach to making humanities and social sciences books free

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The crisis in academic publishing raises fundamental questions about the nature of scholarly enquiry and highlights a lack of connection between the prized forms of scholarship and contemporary readers.

***Lucy Montgomery** explains why partnering with an academic publisher could produce a revolutionary approach to making scholarly work available for free.*



Earlier this week, David Willetts announced the government's intention to make publically funded research available for free to readers. This announcement comes in the wake of a tumultuous few months for academic publishers. The boycott of journals published by Elsevier, the Wellcome Trust's decision to adopt more robust Open Access policies in relation to the research that it funds and, internationally, Harvard University's proclamation that the cost of journal subscriptions has become 'untenable' have added to a growing sense of crisis in the publishing community.

Tension over the ability of commercial publishers to control access to the expressions of publically funded research has been growing for some time. Many academics are eager for their work to be shared more widely. They have been frustrated by the failure of publishing industry business models to reflect the open, collaborative potential of new technologies. And they are increasingly dubious about the value that publishers are providing to scholarly communities in return for distribution monopolies many of them command.

As Professor Tom Cochrane puts it in an article:

“The fact is that the overwhelming majority of articles published in the traditional journal literature are given away by their authors, are refereed gratis by colleagues in the peer review process and are then published.”

David Willetts is, understandably, interested in securing the best possible return on public investments in research for UK tax payers. Nonetheless, researchers operate in highly connected global communities of scholarship. The questions facing funders of research, the challenges facing publishers and the implications of the seismic shifts now taking place in landscapes of scholarly communication are truly global. The disruptive power of the internet is not just changing business models in the archetypal 'copyright industry' – publishing. The Internet is changing the ways in which knowledge is made and communicated.

Remember Books?

Although a great deal of attention is being paid to the ways in which academic publishing business models are failing *scientific* communities, very little has been paid to the crisis facing the humanities.

Whereas it was once common for specialist book length publications in the humanities and social sciences to sell up to three thousand copies, publishers of this kind of book are now pleased if they are able to sell just a few hundred, mostly to university libraries.

Scholarly books have been at the heart of the production and dissemination of knowledge in the humanities and social sciences since the very earliest days of universities. The deep connections between books and scholarship are reflected in the ways in which scholars are trained to carry out and present their work (writing a PhD dissertation, for example), as well as in systems of academic promotion and the funding and ranking of humanities based research and the institutions that produce it.

The crisis in book publishing, then, represents a crisis of the gravest proportions for scholarship in the humanities and social sciences. It raises fundamental questions about the nature of scholarly enquiry and communication in the twenty-first century and highlights a worrying lack of connection between one of the most highly prized forms of scholarship and contemporary readerships. Dwindling sales of scholarly books clearly have consequences for academic publishers and university presses. But they also signal the profound failure of humanities and social sciences publishing to engage effectively with digital technology or to ensure that hard won advancements in knowledge made outside the sciences are made publically available.

Knowledge Unlatched?

It is tempting to simply condemn academic publishers for their failure to engage more effectively with the potential of new technology to facilitate open access to knowledge and new approaches to research.

However, doing so ignores the fact that academic publishing is a diverse industry which has evolved alongside universities' systems for funding research and technologies for copying and distribution – perhaps most notably the printing press. The term 'academic publisher' covers giants such as Elsevier, not-for-profit university publishers, such as Oxford University Press, and smaller operations like Edward Elgar.

It would be foolhardy to ignore the role that publishers have to play in a vibrant innovation ecosystem, or the very real expertise and value that the best aspects of academic publishing have to offer scholarly communities in a digital age.

The commitment to opening up access to academic research expressed by David Willetts in *The Guardian* earlier this week is to be commended. Nonetheless, careful thought will be required to ensure that new approaches to sharing publically funded research are able to retain the best aspects of a scholarly communication system that has evolved over several hundred years.

This is why the [Big Innovation Centre](#) is choosing to partner with academic publisher and serial entrepreneur, [Dr Frances Pinter](#) to pilot a revolutionary new approach to [making scholarly books available for free](#). [Knowledge Unlatched](#) offers a commercially sustainable approach to making books available on open access licenses, while reducing costs to libraries and helping to stimulate markets for new kinds of value added content. Knowledge Unlatched aims is to work with publishers and university libraries, while engaging with scholarly communities through a critical research agenda.

This piece was originally published on the [Big Innovation Centre blog](#).

Note: This article gives the views of the author(s), and not the position of the [Impact of Social Sciences blog](#), nor of the [London School of Economics](#)