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Knowledge Unlatched: Toward an Open and Networked Future for Academic Publishing

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Abstract

Specialist book length publications in the humanities and social sciences (including but not exclusively monographs) are experiencing a crisis. It is clear that the current publishing system is failing both the producers and users of scholarship and neglects many of the opportunities associated with networked culture.

This paper introduces *Knowledge Unlatched* (www.knowledgeunlatched.org), which aims to improve the efficiency of markets for scholarly books.

Remember Books?

The focus of the Finch Review and the U.K. government's response to it is how the existing system for publishing journal articles is failing scientific communities. Much less attention has been paid to shortcomings of current publishing approaches for the humanities and social sciences, or the growing discrepancies between possibilities of access and the realities of dissemination for scholarly books.

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 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 21st century and highlights a worrying lack of connection between one of the most highly prized forms of scholarship and contemporary readerships.

Knowledge Unlatched?

This paper argues that monograph publishing is in crisis, because publishers have been attempting to replicate print business models in a digital world. We suggest that this approach is misguided and that more open approaches to content licensing and distribution will be key to reinvigorating monograph publishing and stimulating the growth of new markets for scholarly books. Real opportunities exist for publishers in a digital world and Open Access licensing will be an important part of sustainable publishing in the 21st century. Libraries have an important role to play in helping monograph publishing to make a successful transition towards effective digital business models that facilitate the widest possible access to scholarly books.

Open Access Books: What Is Already Happening?

A great deal is already happening in the world of open access books. This section briefly examines this landscape, and explains why a different approach is needed. In 2012, the Director of Open Access Books lists 27 publishers as experimenting with open access book publishing, including some of the best known academic presses (Directory of Open Access Books, 2012). Although there are almost as many models as there are initiatives,

only a minority of initiatives are financially self-sustaining; a majority operate with a combination of revenue and subsidy from an educational institution or charitable fund.

One of the first experiments in open access scholarly books, set up in the 1990s, was the National Academies Press,¹ which published free of charge online in PDF and aimed to sell enough print copies to cover production costs. The results of this experiment have been inconclusive. Other experiments suggest that making books open access may help to increase sales by making them more discoverable. When the HSRC Press in Cape Town put their books on open content licenses in the mid-2000s, they saw a 240% increase in their print sales (Gray, Rensselaer, & Bruns, 2010). Making their content free increased awareness of the titles the press was publishing and generated demand for print copies, especially throughout Africa where cross border trade in books has been particularly hard, not least because of lack of knowledge about what is being published in neighbouring countries *ibid*.

If the traditional supply chain in the academic publishing business has been author, publisher, library, reader then what is striking about the Open Access book initiatives already in operation is that they originate from almost all of the parts of the chain and straddle or bypass elements of the chain in diverse ways. The Gutenberg-e Project sources and aggregates content through its competition process, paid for by learned societies and foundations while arranging for publication through Columbia University Press, having negotiated making the content available online for free.² This is an excellent way of promoting the work of young scholars, but is unlikely to be scalable.

One of the larger publisher driven experiments is at Bloomsbury Academic. Monographs in certain subsections of the humanities and social sciences have been published online on a creative commons non-commercial license. The text appears in HTML on the publisher's site. At the same time, Bloomsbury

Academic sells print and e-books through the usual channels.³ In some instances the books are available in both hardback and paperback, or when there is a surprisingly high interest in a book originally published in hardback, a paperback may be released after a year or two.

Bloomsbury's approach, in effect, mirrors the traditional print business model, though at the same time using the more extensive discoverability of the free content as a marketing tool to promote print and e-book sales. So far Bloomsbury Academic is selling at least as many, and in many cases more, copies than it would have expected using the conventional closed model. Authors benefit from expanded readerships and information about usage patterns informs the editors at Bloomsbury Academic of emerging trends in their fields.

Although the Bloomsbury Academic model improves access to scholarly books published on open access licences, it does not address the much deeper structural problems that have plagued monograph publishing over the last several decades. The only kinds of publishers that are able to make money from monograph publishing in the current market are very large publishers that have streamlined operations and charge high prices and heavily subsidised publishers that can take on a few titles each year knowing that subsidies will make up for losses (as many small university presses do now).

Libraries remain the main purchasers of Bloomsbury Academic monographs, and the costs of publishing a title still need to be amortised across the expected units of sale. Even if all academic publishers adopted the Bloomsbury Academic model, the same library budgets would be buying the same number of books (whether print or digital). Publishers would still need to rely on sales of a small number of units at high prices as they do now. The risks of publishing academic monographs would remain the incentives for publishers to take on fewer titles or to focus their

¹ See: <http://www.nap.edu/>

² See: <http://www.gutenberg-e.org/aboutframe.html>

³ See: <http://www.bloomsburyacademic.com/page/28/faqs;jsessionid=67AD40125F3ADBBA7599CA663E50064A>

efforts on more lucrative portions of the market would remain compelling for publishers.

In Search of a New Model: The Role of Libraries

When thinking about a more efficient approach to paying for the publication of monographs, it is useful to return to the question of who currently funds this activity. Most of the money that now pays for monographs comes from library budgets. The role of libraries as the only purchasers of monographs is closely linked to the difficulties that this part of the publishing industry has faced over the last few years. However, it may also be a key advantage when it comes to developing a sustainable strategy for facilitating the large-scale publication of scholarly books on open access licenses.

Libraries have long worked together in consortia to secure benefits for the academic communities that they serve. Librarians have also been key players in moves towards open access academic publishing. By changing the way in which this market is coordinated and separating the fixed costs of publishing from the variable costs associated with producing premium versions of content, it may be possible to help librarians to maximize the positive side effects of what they are already doing: purchasing scholarly books. By helping libraries to form an international consortium that pays a single up-front fee to cover the cost of publishing a book on an open access license, and allowing publishers to retain the rights to sell physical copies or value-added e-book versions of titles, all of the stakeholders in the monograph market will benefit.

The Knowledge Unlatched Business Model

Knowledge Unlatched is a not-for-profit Community Interest Company that is piloting a global library consortium that will coordinate the shared, up-front payment of the fixed costs of publishing scholarly books to publishers, expressed as a Title Fee. In exchange, publishers will post titles online on an open content license.

This is how the model works (see appendix for notes):

1. Publishers¹ offer titles² for sale reflecting origination costs only via Knowledge Unlatched.³
2. Individual libraries select titles either as individual titles or as collections (as they do from library suppliers now).
3. Their selections are sent to Knowledge Unlatched specifying the titles to be purchased at the stated price(s).
4. The price, called a Title Fee (set by publishers and negotiated by Knowledge Unlatched), is paid to publishers to cover the fixed costs of publishing each of the titles that were selected by a minimum number of libraries to cover the Title Fee.
5. Publishers make the selected titles available Open Access (on a creative commons or similar open license) and are then paid the Title Fee.
6. Publishers make print copies, e-Pub, and other digital versions of selected titles available to member libraries at a discount that reflects their contribution to the Title Fee and incentivizes membership.¹⁰

As the number of member libraries grows and the number of titles on offer increases, the price per title per library decreases. The Title Fee paid to publishers is a fixed charge.

Publishers that participate in the scheme retain the usual rights to sell print copies and all digital formats to non-member libraries and individuals as before.

By participating and engaging with the consortium, publishers will gain access to funding to cover the fixed costs of publishing scholarly monographs in the form of a Title Fee that will be paid by the consortium member libraries to publishers. In return for the Title Fee, publishers will make an HTML version (or other agreed sub-optimal version) of specified books available on a creative commons or equivalent open content license.

Because the fixed costs associated with getting the first digital copy will be covered by the Knowledge Unlatched Title Fee, publishers will be able to sell physical copies of books, or e-book versions, to consortium member libraries at a discount. Publishers will also have the flexibility to experiment with different approaches and maximizing their income across a wider market. For example, they might choose to publish books in paperback right away rather than hardback or develop premium value-added content for which libraries and individuals may be willing to pay extra.

Taking a single title as an example, if 400 libraries were members of the consortium and the Title Fee was £8,000, each library would pay £20. If there were 600 members, the charge to each library would be £13.33. There are two key variables: the Title Fee and the number of library members. A small percentage of the Title Fee will pay for the running costs of the consortium.

Much will remain as before with publishers competing on the basis of quality publishing with all stakeholders in the academic publishing ecosystem standing to benefit from the results.

Libraries will be able to make their budgets go further. They will facilitate opening access and play a major role in helping resolve the problems facing academic publishing in the 21st century. By coming together through such a consortium and pooling library resources to pay the Title Fees of selected high-quality titles, libraries can transform

the academic publishing ecosystem in a way that benefits everyone.

Knowledge Unlatched invites libraries and publishers to help build a sustainable open future for scholarly books by participating in the Knowledge Unlatched pilot. Libraries will get new book content from world-class publishers at regular intervals over the course of the pilot and into the future. Libraries will also have access to a range of additional benefits, including special discounts on hardback and e-book formats.

In a digital world, discoverability is a powerful driver of sales. Making books digitally available on open content licenses makes them more discoverable through Internet search engines. This not only helps to generate more sales, it helps scholarly work to connect effectively with relevant audiences, regardless of their ability to pay for a copy. This will help to increase the impact of research in the humanities and social sciences and improve returns on investments in this important area of scholarship.

By building a commercially sustainable market for books that are truly universally open access, readers in all markets, including the world's poorest, will gain the widest possible access to high-quality scholarship. This model is not only a game-changer in business terms, it holds out the prospect of leveling the playing field when it comes to accessing the corpus of world knowledge.

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Appendix

Detailed Notes on the Business Model:

- ¹ Participating publishers would include university and commercial presses, and others. The initiative is meant to scale and could eventually include a significant proportion of the specialised scholarly monographs currently published.
- ² Content would include scholarly monographs and specialised academic titles. A number of straight forward technologies exist to enable publishers to fulfil orders for their titles via the programme, or a partnership with an existing aggregator may be possible. The principal criterion of any fulfilment process would be to keep costs low.
- ³ The publisher's price would reflect its fully loaded first copy costs, plus an operating margin. By logical extension, a publisher's operation would be sustainable were it to sell all of its titles under this model.
- ⁴ In the U.S., the likely target audience would be primarily (but not exclusively) the libraries in Carnegie Classes 15–17 and Carnegie Class 23. In the UK and Europe the target audience would be university research and teaching libraries.
- ⁵ Knowledge Unlatched to coordinate library participation, probably in conjunction with North American, European, and Australasian consortia. The transaction costs would need to be minimal.
- ⁶ To accelerate and simplify the process, an online selection system would allow the libraries to inform Knowledge Unlatched which titles they would be willing to purchase at the stipulated price(s). The library buying group could set the minimum number of libraries required to enable the purchase to be made (e.g., all titles selected by X% or more of the participating libraries).
- ⁷ The library review and selection process would provide a market demand mechanism sufficient to ensure that publishers provide books of sufficient quality.
- ⁸ There would be no volume discount based on the number of titles selected, as the publishers' costs are not volume driven—although other incentives will be introduced, such as additional discounts on other products.
- ⁹ The OA version could be PDF, HTML, or some other suboptimal digital format. The licensing would be under a Creative Commons or equivalent open content licences. (The degree of restriction, e.g., non-commercial or no derivatives to be specified by the publisher.)
- ¹⁰ The value-added versions of e-books provided to participating libraries would need to provide an exclusive benefit of sufficient value to overcome free ridership. This might include EPUB and/or other desired digital formats, a preferential price on POD or other print editions to member libraries. Other exclusive benefits may include extra metadata/cataloguing, delivering data to library discovery tools. Preferential discounts on other products may be offered.