
EDITORIAL

Publishing, the Internet and the Commons: Some Debates and Developments

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This editorial details a few central concerns of contributions to the WPCC special issue on ‘Publishing, the Internet and the Commons’. It outlines the need to consider publishing from a media studies perspective, the growing role of platforms in publishing in all forms and the dangers of continued market concentration for access and diversity. The author considers the special status of publications, their kudos in scholarly communications in particular, and how copyright and commons principles are considered by contributions within the issue suggesting that both a reorientation in values and work on infrastructural practicalities will be needed for a world undertaking more commons-based publishing. An understanding of the present dangers of scholarly publishing being mobilised as a key component of research governance and surveillance, underpinned by opaque and inequitable algorithms is also highlighted.

Keywords: commons; publishing studies; media studies; open access; platforms; publishing infrastructures

Introduction: Commons-based publishing?

The idea of the commons has been gaining traction lately as a reaction to the loss of public resources of all kinds with new book titles (Bollier and Helfrich, 2019; Standing, 2019) signalling both the opportunities and the dangers of further erosion to commonly held digital and natural resources. Experimental commons approaches to media and publishing have been highlighted by many as much of the supposed democratising potential of the internet has been thwarted or even thrown into reverse. Scholarly communications and the knowledge commons have been notable instances – with debates around the desirability and viability of an open access online commons prominent. Commons publishing topics spontaneously emerged as a significant strand within several book titles (Bauwens, Kostakis and Pazaitis, 2019, Birkinbine, 2020, Broumas, 2020 and Papadimitropolous, 2020) of this journal’s publisher (University of Westminster Press), in the ‘Critical Digital and Social Media Studies’ series (n.d) edited by Christian Fuchs who contributes to this issue (Fuchs, 2021). Against that backdrop the idea for an issue of *WPCC* on ‘Publishing the Internet and the Commons’ took shape prior to the onset of Covid-19 and had its origins in a plan for a live event, a symposium with the aim of identifying principles, best practices, emerging challenges and vital next steps

required to support commons-based or inspired publishing both for general readerships and within scholarly communications. Like so much else in 2020/21 the plans did not survive the change of circumstances imposed by the Covid-19 virus, but some of those involved with the original symposium plan accepted an invitation to contribute to this issue. Retained also from the original scheme was a focus on scholar-led, library and university press publishing and on the principles underlying alternative platforms and collaborative structures, commons theory and mechanisms of self-governance.

Publishing, media studies and the commons

Publishing as an object of study has not generally manifested in the mainstream of media and communication studies. It has been presented to students as a vocationally slanted adjunct to literary studies (especially in creative writing), as a component within information studies settings or as a purely practical and professional pursuit. Of course each of those approaches has merits and limitations. Yet with digital media and the internet transforming media across the spectrum there is now a stronger case than ever for also considering publishing alongside other media attuned to some of the framings of cultural studies but also firmly within a media and communication studies setting. This issue therefore attempts to highlight publishing as one cultural and content channel that shares many dilemmas and features with others in the digital age.

A media industries approach to publishing – evidenced for example in the journal *Media Industries* (n.d.) – can also be seen in part in the latest of John B. Thompson's descriptive accounts (2010; 2021) of the impact of digital publishing. In these two titles he deals almost exclusively with trade publishing. In the academic field, the media and communications scholar – now also a scholar-publisher fronting the *mediastudies.press* (n.d.) – Jeff Pooley (2017) has likewise argued as per the title of a recent post, 'As Goes the Media, So Goes Scholarly Publishing' noting that:

We have, after all, an overpacked quiver of analytic tools that we've developed to scrutinize popular media. With care, these lines of critique and analysis could be delivered to the sibling domain of scholarly communication.

On the 'About' page of *mediastudies.press* there is no direct mention of the commons but Pooley's Humanities Commons profile (Humanities Commons, 2021) includes a link to the Open Access Books Network (2021) active with scholar publishers reflecting on the commons and working on developing some of the shared infrastructure envisaged by some commons advocates indicating further lines of continuity.

When John B. Thompson (2021) recently ran through a variety of strands in the tapestry of trade publishing it was noticeable how publishing transformations echoed developments in film, TV, music, radio under the looming shadow of a generalised 'platform capitalism' (Srnicek, 2017). There are chapters concerned with market concentration and product visibility under the influence of Amazon; user-generated content ('The Self-Publishing Explosion'); on crowdfunding and on trade publishing's nearest approximation (Scribd) to a digital subscription model. (Thompson, 2021: 172–215, 216–282; 283–318; 319–348). All these frames will seem familiar to those studying other media faced with similar challenges. Even as digital publishing zealots for nearly a couple of decades have trumpeted a never-actually-arriving era of a wide span of emancipated writers successfully 'speaking' directly to the public without any barriers imposed by publishing's traditional gatekeeping intermediaries, something else rather different was happening: the installation of new even more powerful digital intermediaries working with or against the old incumbents including the newly merged Penguin

Random House – itself born of a reaction to the perception of a looming Amazon presence, a behemoth able to command preferential terms and high discounts across eBook and print sales. (Sabbagh, 2012). Amazon's power and market share has likewise grown in many media and IT sectors. In publishing this has included user generated content especially DIY self-publishing where CreateSpace (bought by Amazon in 2005) over time morphed into KDP Print (reedsyblog, 2020; Thompson, 2021: 244–249).

Platforms become more powerful

Increasingly all such activities operate under conditions of 'Platform Capitalism' (Srnicsek, 2016) with such companies apparently keenest on 'locking in' customers via free services then rolling out subscription models that monopolise key lines of content in music, film, television and sport to name just a few of culture's vital and most popular arteries. But what of scholarly communications and the rise of platforms there?

In this issue Martin Paul Eve sounds a stark note of warning regarding platformization and its ability to squash individuality and opportunity:

So, for me, platformization is in some ways the opposite of the individuation of publishing expression. This is not to say that all platforms are bad or evil, merely to note that their very function is to homogenise workflows, experience, and expression (Eve and Lockett: 67).

Elsewhere Thompson (2021) goes so far as to ask the question whether the time for anti-trust legislation in the sector has arrived to which the answer would appear to be in the affirmative: 'There is a strong case for subjecting the large tech companies – Google, Facebook, Amazon and others – to antitrust scrutiny ...' (Thompson, 2021: 445). Reading across to the music industry the corporate behaviour of Spotify also suggests the need for measures to address the accumulation of brute commercial power and direct influence on government in other media too (Eriksson et al, 2019).

It is also by no means a coincidence that a scholarly article raising the issue of high profits and oligopoly in scholarly communications has been so frequently cited (Larivière, Haustein and Mongeon, 2015) within the literature. Christian Fuchs also pertinently highlights the shockingly low levels of taxation enjoyed by such territory-footloose digital corporations (Fuchs, 2018) working across media rapidly converging digitally. Against such a backdrop of highly imperfect nominal capitalist 'competition', the digital commons appears to offer perhaps, theoretical frameworks and specific modalities to counter this.

In this issue (Fuchs, 2021) presents a concrete example of an example of what digital commons media production might look like in the televisual form of the live studio debate Club 2.0. He outlines what potential digital commons possesses in the digital public sphere and consequent principles for advancing digital democracy. Shared ownership he argues is vital since, 'The opportunity to get published is commodified while the published content is a commons'. Moreover the form of open access in academic publishing currently in the making suggests to him that 'Capitalist open access is a digital capitalism of the commons.' (Fuchs, 2021: 20). His mention of 'influencer capitalism' could arguably be usefully applied within a study of trade publishing title acquisitions, increasingly attracted in fiction and non-fiction to authors with platforms, vloggers with instant clout and access to social media channels ripe for mobilisation of publishing product streams. All this is a long way from the 'slow media' he advocates. Linking a number of disturbing trends to the erosion of democracy Fuchs outlines vital issues to address for the outcome of digital democracy including 'techno-realism' (Fuchs, 2021: 24) something not so well represented in the many publishing industry fulminations

with their keynotes being solutionism (see Morozov, 2013) in the imperative mode ('adapt or die'), variants of the technological or digital sublime (Mosco, 2005), concealed and exploited human labour hidden behind a patina of 'fauxtimation' (Taylor, 2018) and the publishing 'reality that working for free is a dominant and inescapable experience [...] for creative workers' (Brook, O'Brien, Taylor, 2020: 138) during internships, work experience and even thereafter. Fuchs's advocacy of 'Public service Internet platforms ... not controlled, but rather enabled by the state' (21) suggests parallels with the scholarly communications infrastructure discussed and advocated by other contributors to this issue present also in his arguments made with Marisol Sandoval, (Fuchs and Sandoval, 2013) for diamond open access.

Symbolic capital: Prestige, kudos and copyright

Rather less a special case than it perhaps it likes to think itself the contemporary moment serves also to highlight how the particularity of publishing as a media form centres around the outsized significance of professional status and the kudos of 'getting published'. In trade publishing social, cultural and symbolic capital with its agents and lustre-laden imprints are central. In higher education, journal league tables, impact factors, elite Ivy league or Oxbridge university presses and gatekeepers of various kinds help to 'entrench inequality' reinforcing the impact of grading systems that have the ambition to rank research content by automated proxy measures or to conjure up the tradition and allure of established imprints (Gadd, 2021; Chen and Chan, forthcoming 2021; Posada and Chen, 2018). As Thompson outlines, 'Symbolic capital is the accumulated prestige and status associated with the publishing house.' (Thompson, 2010, 6) though it is also increasingly the author brand that matters most – a brand that can be mobilised to assist other authors, power literary festivals and anchor in-store promotions. Here Thompson is talking about the trade publishing 'field' but as Martin Paul Eve (2014, 48–49) explains so well such prestige is even more the bread, butter, caviar and champagne of academic publishing imprints or association journal imprimatur who over decades have traded on their track record of quality reputations, pricing, in many cases, their products accordingly high for the privilege. In this issue (Eve and Lockett, 2021) Eve was asked again about the power of the prestige economy in scholarly communications that he raised earlier in 2014.

Prestige, however, is a proxy measure for quality. It economically mirrors academic labour scarcity because it stands as a surrogate in order to avoid the labour-intensive practices of constantly reappraising academic material in every situation (Eve, 2014: 48).

Over six years on from his book and after creating one of the most successful of all alternative journal publishing frameworks the Open Library of Humanities (n.d.) there are still no easy answers. Now the stakes appear to be as Eve says:

an increase in competition between researchers, with personal brand and associated metricised data to be the core basis on which we are appraised and ranked. (Eve and Lockett, 2021: 71)

And there is every sign in publishing as elsewhere that prestige is being further automated with researchers themselves now firmly in the midst of a battleground for scarce jobs in which publishing metrics form part of the ammunition and assessment criteria in many contexts, leading up to and including university league tables, themselves 'poor' proxies for all manner of consequential 'assessment' and decision-making undertaken by various parties from students to policymakers. (Gadd, 2020; 2021). Chan and Chen (forthcoming 2021, 2–3)

show how major commercial publishers are building on traditional publishing kudos, whilst translating this into the currency of Big Data and end-to-end 'predictive' research surveillance:

data analytic providers leverage rankings as a part of their strategies to further extract rent and assets from the university beyond their traditional roles as publishers and citation data providers ... The goal is to generate predictions of user's behaviour and actually influence user's behaviour as determined by the designer of the platform.

Prestige is just one way publishers have insulated themselves against meaningful change. Copyright enforcement is another and as Björk (2021, 177) explains, 'high barriers to new entrants, partly due to journal ranking lists and impact factors, as well as the low bargaining power of suppliers and customers, explain why this industry has been so well shielded from the disruptive forces of the Internet', noting also that scholarly communications are also a 'special case of complementary goods' (181). As moves to 'gold' open access are solidified however – as before with the move online of journal publications – 'the same price spiral appears to be continuing' (177). Not only are the Ostromian commons not emerging within scholarly communications (excepting in isolated pockets) but the very language and essence of the commons is being misappropriated (Dulong de Rosnay, 2020):

Commonswashing, the appropriation of the semantics and the message of the commons for commercial purposes without endorsing its values, constitutes an additional co-optation phenomenon. Conceptualized as an extension of the logic of greenwashing, commonswashing constitutes a capture of the language, but also potentially of the imaginary and the social benefits of the actual commons.(11)

The result? '[M]ore fuzziness in public opinion on the actual definition, principles and values of genuine commons'. (ibid). Eve in this issue also highlights the problems of the discussion of the commons and in ensuring that there is genuine relevance to publishing itself: "The commons", in other words, becomes a floating signifier onto which everyone projects their own take' (Eve and Lockett, 2021: 66), with Eve otherwise noting that as a historical analogy the commons can 'help us to focus our pragmatic efforts. For instance, in the above, if, again, we turn to the actual conditions of commoning and its properties, we do see an emphasis on governance and ownership'.

Commons principles

In this issue Dulong de Rosnay (2020) returns to fundamentals commons ideas revisiting Elinor Ostrom's principles of the commons (Ostrom, 1990) and applying these to consider a range of open access publishing modalities including those of green and gold open access and pirate libraries. The results are sobering with none of the current forms of open access appearing to be 'true commons' (Dulong de Rosnay, 58) thus analysed. However it is noted that pirate libraries appear to share some of the positive characteristics of peer-to-peer networks of easy access and even 'broader cultural diversity than commercial distributors' (ibid). Moreover as Björk (2021, 186) also highlights regarding the SciHub website that, 'From a moral view, many academic readers ... see these downloads as more justified than those of music or movies, given that many people view the research results as a public good'. In such a context the desirability of infrastructure that is accountable to a community leads Dulong du Rosnay to the conclusion that 'Commons-based ownership of the infrastructure of publishing is crucial at the time of the rent-seeking "redirection of big publishers" business strategy towards the acquisition and integration of scholarly infrastructure and the tools and services

that underpin the scholarly research life cycle ...' (Dulong du Rosnay 2021, 51). Systemic changes are required she argues – 'a mix of individual behavioral changes, collective actions, institutional changes, and most importantly, funding open access infrastructure as a commons' (60). Resituating 'knowledge as a public good' as Kember argues will however need more than open access per se, the clear danger being that 'Open access research will become embedded in invisible or black-boxed information infrastructures, automated systems that standardize and homogenize output and smart environments that embed inequalities at a representational and algorithmic level'. (Kember 2020, 8).

Towards the commons?

Though Eve notes the influence of commons thinking on collaborative initiatives in publishing he is guarded about the value of commons perspectives (see also Moore, 2019). Yet in scholarly communications there are several initiatives looking to offer alternative platforms for publishing that look to bypass dominant incumbents notably RELX/Elsevier ('the business the internet could not kill', Cookson, 2015). In the UK Research England and Arcadia have (combined) awarded £3 million to the Community-led Open Publication Infrastructures for Monographs (COPIM) project a scholar-led partnership whereas at MIT, Direct to Open (D2O) has been launched to develop a collaborative, library-supported open-access model for open access monographs. (MIT News, 2021). Adema and Moore's article in this issue (Adema and Moore, 2021) stress the COPIM project as a 'latent commons' highlighting once again 'commoning' as an activity and duty of care as an ethos. This development of communal and collaborative structures disavows the language of scale and oversized dominant platforms in favour of communal collaborations:

Reimagining the relations within the publishing system beyond a mere calculative logic focused on sustainability is essential when developing an alternative, equitable OA publishing environment, in order to enable new forms of collaboration and to redefine the future of scholarly publishing in more communal settings. (Adema and Moore, 2021: 32).

Whilst mainstream economic commentary has until very recently stayed largely silent about the dangers of oligopoly and monopoly with technological boosterism filling the vacuum, the vision offered by COPIM doubles down on the importance of values and ethos insisting there are other rules to play by than size, scale and low-cost high volume outputs. Drawing on Anna Tsing's critique of the language and logics of scalability their article endeavours to shift the terms of the debate. Library repositories it should be said might also constitute another channel for collaborative commons-style infrastructure or part of the jigsaw. Shearer (2018: 42) for example quotes the 'vision' of the Confederation of Open Access Repositories which puts university library repositories at the centre of a transformed sector, 'as the foundation for a distributed, globally networked infrastructure for scholarly communication, on top of which layers of value added services will be deployed, thereby transforming the system, making it more researchcentric, open to and supportive of innovation, while also collectively managed by the scholarly community'. However in the UK at least it is the activities of COPIM, the Open Library of Humanities and Radical Open Access that are in many ways still leading the debate on the development of commons-influenced publishing and infrastructures for the moment.

Likewise independently minded are the artistic shadow libraries highlighted in this issue in the interview with Cornelia Sollfrank and Felix Stalder in this issue (WPCC Editorial Board, 2021). These too operate according to a different ethos either in relation to conventional

platforms or to analogue protocols. As Adema and Moore also stress, for Sollfrank and Stalder the building of infrastructures and institutions is crucial and care and 'practices of commoning are central'. Stalder is not sanguine about the prospects for 'copyright reform' as a suitable strategy for a shift to a commons-inflected environment. Yet in the world of art he is able to point to the inspiration of exceptions such as the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam's sharing and reuse policy even though a much wider 'significant shift in the internal culture of these institutions' is needed. He adds:

At the moment, the state is set up to create and support markets at the expense of all other ways of creating the social. The situation reminds me of what Jean Ziegler remarked about the relation between the global north and the global south: the issue is not to give more, but to steal less.

The interview concludes with Stalder's suggestion of a more ambitious agenda, developing of 'open source code', open educational resources and 're-envisioning public institutions, such as public broadcasting as part of a commons' as Fuchs (this issue) also proposes. Developments and debate in the field thus continue with publishing and media enmeshed in a set of complex digital-political-economic and cultural transformations.

Competing Interests

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