The Rise of Open Access Books
Recorded at 2018 Frankfurt Book Fair

with

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ROBINSON: Open access is transforming scholarly journal publishing, yet the looming size of the journal ecosystem has thrown into deep shadow an equally remarkable transformation in scholarly books. In recent years, e-book acquisition rates and usage have soared. E-books offer multiple advantages, from acquisition models to accessibility and researcher engagement metrics. In parallel with research coming out of the UK, an ongoing study by the US-based Book Industry Study Group, or BISG, is identifying the challenges in understanding the usage of OA e-books. This research will provide much needed documentation on e-book impact levels, especially for funders of open access publishing programs.

Our own panel discussion will discuss the viability models and the unique needs of OA books compared to OA journals. Joining me, nearest me here is Brian O'Leary, executive director of the New York City-based BISG, Book Industry Study Group, and one of the principal investigators on the project to understand OA e-book usage. And furthest from me over there, David Worlock, a longtime independent publishing analyst and co-chair of Outsell's leadership programs, whose most recent blog post is in the area – on the hot topic of Plan S. Do we have a Plan B, he asks – something I'm sure we're all very interested in. So welcome to you both.

O'LEARY: Thank you.

WORLOCK: Thank you.

ROBINSON: David, if I can turn to you first, where are we with open access at the moment?

WORLOCK: In book terms, I think we're struggling. I think we've made a really interesting start. A lot of publishers have played. But several things seem to me to be missing from the picture. What's happened in open access journal publishing – article publishing – is a clear business model around APCs. There is not that clarity in the book world. Charges to authors vary hugely. There is a danger of escalating charges to authors or putting the costs of doing this beyond many authors' ability to pay.

Equally, there is a sort of duality, it seems to me. On the one hand, we are releasing these books, but we are not effectively releasing them into a world where machines can read them as easily as people. And we have to reflect that within five years of this date, the readers of books will be in the majority machines and in the minority people. Especially in scholarly areas, especially in areas of high technical content, the books will begin to speak to the books. And they have to be marked up. They have to have the right metadata. They have to have the right attention to detail in the process of making them available for machines to read. Now, I think we are lagging behind in this sphere. So I see the road towards open access in books as being a less even, more broken road than open access in journal articles. And I shall be interested to know if Brian agrees with this.

O'LEARY: Well, I do. I think your assessment's really good. We hadn't kicked around the machine-to-machine piece, but I would amplify that. I think when you say there's no clear business model, for us that came down to there's no clear way to measure what's actually happening. The product that you mentioned at the outset, which is funded by the Mellon Foundation and involves the University of Michigan, University of North Texas, which you also mentioned, and Knowledge Unlatched, were trying to find the super set of measurement points that would effectively say how do you know whether an open access work is being prescribed, there's uptake, what's the readership, etc.? I think the machine-to-machine piece might be really interesting within that as well.

WORLOCK: Can I then go on one stage and say I do believe that this will be a fertile area for fresh business models? I have been very much involved in a project in Berlin called Knowledge Unlatched, which has been experimenting now successfully for three years with a different sort of business model for, as they would say, unlatching books – that is, to crowdfund by way of library budgets. So if you can get a number of libraries – they deal with up to 700 libraries around the world – to subscribe, effectively, then you can open the book to the world. All of the initiation costs are covered. All of the outlay in originating and marking up and preparing the text are then covered. And you can then unlatch it so that everybody

who uses those libraries – but actually, then, everybody who uses any library or anybody who uses any system – can then read that book.

O'LEARY: And I think the advantage there, too, is it solves a problem that libraries – it doesn't solve the entire problem, but it addresses a problem that libraries face in that there's predictability in how much money that you're going to spend, and you have unlimited access in perpetuity, which are problems for a lot of the paid models right now for libraries. There's either a very high price, an unpredictable price, or a restriction on how many uses you have for that content.

WORLOCK: I find, too, that libraries are concerned with open access books that they fear become the vanity projects of authors or sometimes foundations or sometimes special interests. Commercial publication was one of the defenses against that. Remove that defense, make the book open, and then the network becomes full of material which either was not worthy of publication or is put there plainly for a propagandist purpose.

O'LEARY: I agree with you about Knowledge Unlatched. As I said, in the project that we're working on right now, they are the primary data gatherer on the project and the white paper that's currently being drafted. There's going to be a discussion in December in New York, a convening of about two dozen stakeholders, led by Knowledge Unlatched and then moderated as well. But our goal is to take the draft paper, use it as a discussion point, and then come out of this summit or convening with both that super set and maybe some agreements about how to move forward on the business models.

ROBINSON: You mentioned the super set there. That's about trying to get better at understanding the data and the analytics there. And that will give us what?

O'LEARY: Well, with understanding, if you actually know how a book is being used, how widely it's being used – if you can measure the platforms and/or institutions that are prescribing it, I think that gives you a starting point for saying, all right, this has a value and we should fund it and we could fund it in this way. That's our game plan overall.

ROBINSON: So with this kind of context that you're both talking about, what is there out there that's going to give us hope for the future when it comes to OA books?

O'LEARY: (laughter) You go first.

WORLOCK: Well, I have huge hope for the future. I really do believe that we are going to create a wider shared knowledge base in society of genuine utility. But this will only take place if we are able to fully explore the possibilities of open access, especially in books. And by fully explore, I mean that we have to sharpen all the time our ability to intelligently search things.

We need to search, for example, by concepts. You'll find around this fair lots of AI players – artificial intelligence players – who are beginning on this process of moving towards concept-based searching. Only when you or I or the machine next to us can search a whole range of books together and find where certain concepts are mentioned and where they are explained or explored – only then are we going to get real utility into this business.

And let's not forget the illustration. I think we have, in the world of technology, been hugely neglectful of the importance of being able to search images, video, animations, and to link them to the text. I think we're now beginning to catch up on this. And those who open access books have to prepare them so that they can be effectively searched in this way.

O'LEARY: And I think, building on this, that – one of the things I think that's really promising is there is greater attention because of topics like accessibility – there's greater attention paid to workflows, and so therefore there's greater attention being paid to creating the input that you need to tag non-textual assets in a good way. I think the thing I would say for me that's really promising, in addition to Unglue.it and similar smaller efforts that are akin to Knowledge Unlatched, is the American Assembly's Open Syllabus Project.

ROBINSON: I was going to ask about that.

O'LEARY: American Assembly is based up at Columbia University in New York City. And for the last four or five years, they've been collecting syllabi and essentially cataloging what's being prescribed. They're now developing tools to report out. It's going to give us a greater understanding of both paid and non-paid open access texts that are being actually used in courseware throughout the world. And I think it's going to give us a different sense of what bestsellers and what utility looks like.

ROBINSON: That's excellent. So we've had quite a good, quick overview of where we are with OA, so thanks to you both on that – some idea of some different things that are out there that can give us some hope and so on. But I guess the question –

Brian, if I can turn back to you – what do you see as the next big thing or the next issue that OA books needs to tackle?

O'LEARY: Well, this might reflect that I work for an organization that fundamentally looks at supply chain issues, but I do see open access as a supply chain issue. I think that there's been efforts to push on one area or push on another area and say how is it going to get funded or how can we not have it funded? I think if we look at it across the entire supply chain, then we're better off. That's why we liked and were happy to participate in the Mellon project, because the study is going to open up a variety of different opportunities for us to say where could we optimize, not for publishers or for authors or for libraries, but for the entire supply chain?

ROBINSON: David, same question to you, really. What do you think's next? What's the next big thing?

WORLOCK: Well, I think Brian dropped the word which I am most keen on at the moment when he said the word workflow. One of the things which is going to change all of our lives in the next five years lingers under – and how American is this – lingers under the acronym RPA. Robotic process automation – RPA. Now, what's that all about? It's about taking things which we do routinely and making them work as something which a computer can do – something which could be done in a network.

Many of the things which we do routinely involve looking up books. I've just been working on a project to create legal contracts. Sometimes you have to look at a dozen law books to find the right precedents or the right arguments which have to go into a particular contractual situation. Now, doing that becomes an extremely automatable activity. RPA therefore needs to be a reader of lots and lots of different books. If those books are open, that of course is a much easier environment to work in. But how do you license a machine which may look into a law book today, but may not look into the same law book again for six months? It's extremely difficult. All sorts of ideas are now welling up around open access to knowledge materials and the way we build our future in networked communication. So I think this is hugely exciting.

ROBINSON: So both of those things, though, the supply chain and workflow and so on – what would you say are the key challenges for publishers of OA books in order to kind of take advantage of that future that you're both painting?

O'LEARY: Well, I think the biggest challenge on workflow is you typically want to design something with the end in mind. So you want to say what are all the uses, how many different channels are we going to support, how could we do it, so – if you want to create print books and e-books and audiobooks all from one source. And we don't know what the end looks like yet. So the challenge is – and I hope the project that I'm working on now begins to get at that – at least shapes what the end looks like. But you don't want to overinvest in workflow and create products that don't have a demand. On the other hand, if RPC is really the endgame, you're going to have to have much more robust data gathering and content structuring at the beginning of the process. Otherwise, there's nothing to find.

WORLOCK: Absolutely. But the answer to me to your question, Carl, is imagination. Here we have, in all these halls, hundreds and hundreds of publishers – people who are intimate with usage and the way people want usage to be. But I am frustrated at times by the fact that we don't seem to be able to make the digital world as inventive as it possibly could be. And I think the electronic book is an example of this.

I keep reading figures and statistics from people who say, oh, well, the demand for electronic books is going down, etc. I'm not at all surprised. Not at all surprised. If you turn the electronic book into a simple reprint of something which once existed in print, why should people be more entranced by that than they were by the original print product? You simply changed the transmission system. It is time for electronic publishing and the electronic book to stand up as a genuinely newly minted product in its own right. And the way in which, in the network, you can integrate video and text and visuals is far enhanced from the experience you can give on the page of a book. Why don't we use it for what it can do?

ROBINSON: I quite agree. We'll turn to the audience in a moment or two for any questions, if you're busy thinking of them. But just from my own experience in thinking about format agnosticism and that whole idea of being able to create content that you don't know what the end delivery channel is is becoming more and more important across the publishing industry. And what you're talking about, David, is bringing those things together as well and taking advantage of that and leveraging it.

WORLOCK: I'm also talking about the ability of audiences to make their own products from the body of information which is in the open network.

ROBINSON: Thank you, David. Thank you, Brian. It's been a very interesting discussion. I'm Carl Robinson. (applause)

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