

DOES PUBLISHING A BOOK AS OPEN ACCESS AFFECT PRINT SALES?

Lara Speicher,

Publishing Manager, UCL Press

While most people would agree that greater readership for scholarly books can be reached by publishing as Open Access (OA) rather than in print only, publishers fear that their print sales would be adversely affected by simultaneously publishing in OA and print. Since sales of print and e-books are the main route for traditional publishers to recoup the costs involved in peer review, development work, editing, typesetting, design, sales, marketing, staff, and overheads, this is an understandable concern. But is it really true? Furthermore, with dwindling print sales for academic monographs, can sales from print and e-books really be relied on in the long term as the main way for publishers to recoup their investment?

There are very few studies about the effect of OA publishing on print sales, as it is still early days for OA monograph publishing. Also, commercial publishers that are experimenting with OA might, understandably, be reluctant to share their data – or have too little to provide any conclusive findings. This article will draw on two key studies that have been published by OAPEN (the European platform for hosting and disseminating Open Access monographs) and OAPEN-UK/Jisc (a UK body that provides digital solutions for UK education and research), as well as the experiences of UCL Press, the university press of University College London, which launched as the UK's first fully OA university press in June 2015.

To start the discussion, the following is an overview of the current situation in scholarly publishing. In a recent article Donald Barclay, Deputy University Librarian at the University of California, described the academic monograph as 'an endangered species',¹ highlighting the plummeting sales over the last two decades, which are widely reported as being in the low hundreds.² Together with rising retail prices, pressure on library acquisition budgets from rising costs of journal subscriptions, and the increasing move towards digital and patron-driven acquisition by libraries, the outlook for the current scholarly publishing model does indeed look bleak. So, one might conclude from the above that print sales of academic monographs in the current model are in an inevitable decline, regardless of any larger scale implementation of OA.

Barclay points out the numerous advantages of OA publishing: shifting towards a model in which the cost is underwritten upfront, rather than recouped via sales; the number of readers that can be reached can be considerably greater than via print sales alone; the regions of the world that can be reached via OA are larger; and the potential of additional features and more flexible approaches in digital publishing is advantageous in a changing scholarly communications environment.

The OAPEN-NL study on OA monographs, published in 2013, reviewed Open Access monograph publishing models, and in particular the effect on print sales of making a book OA.³ The project took place between June 2011 and November 2012 and compared 50 OA monographs with 50 similar printed titles. The study found no evidence of any effect of OA on print sales. Books with an OA edition were sold in the same amounts as the conventionally published control group. However, what the study did find was a positive effect on online usage for the OA books. This became very clear when average sales were compared to average downloads for the OA books hosted on OAPEN: 144 copies sold versus

2,800 downloads. If readership is one of the goals of scholarly publishing, then there is little doubt that OA delivers.

The OAPEN-UK/Jisc study on OA monograph publishing, published in February 2016, undertook a 'matched pairs pilot' between September 2011 and August 2014.⁴ It reviewed the usage of 47 pairs of titles published by five different publishers, including both front list and backlist titles. One group of books was published as OA, while the other group, the control group, was published traditionally in print. The main platforms for distribution of the OA versions were the OAPEN platform, the publishers' own websites (although this in itself was considered problematic, as the publishers were not set up to host OA products and the books were therefore not very visible) and Google Books. The study raised many interesting questions about the supply chains currently in place for priced books (e-books and printed copies), which are not designed to distribute or host OA books. The final report, however, is inconclusive as to whether or not the availability of OA affects print sales, given the small sample size and the fact that, according to the study, OA is likely to remain a small proportion of most traditional publishers' business. Nevertheless, the report does go as far as to state that the effect of OA on sales appears to be low in the current environment, and given this apparent low risk, it encourages publishers to experiment with different OA business models for monographs.

Recent experience at UCL Press tends towards similar conclusions. It was officially relaunched in June 2015 at UCL – having previously been an imprint of a commercial publisher – as the UK's first fully OA university press. It publishes scholarly monographs, collected editions, textbooks and journals, all freely downloadable in PDF format, as well as distributing them for sale in print and e-book editions. When UCL Press launched, it was hard to predict the level of readership that the works might attract, but they were confident that through OA a wide readership would be reached, and they knew from other OA publishers what kind of figures they were achieving.

Now, just over a year since UCL Press's first titles were published, it is interesting to reflect on what has been achieved in that time. The total number of downloads for fourteen books in one year reached over 37,000 copies in more than 160 countries.

These numbers might not mean much out of context, so it is interesting to look at the figures for the individual works and the time they have been available, and then compare them with print sales.

The reasons for the differences between the individual titles are numerous and not always easy to pin down. They can include: the size of the potential market, the promotion undertaken, the author's reputation, associated events and anniversaries that have helped to promote the book, the availability of print in the geographical locations most interested in the book, and the author's involvement in promotion. For example, *The Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology: Characters and Collections* was published at the time of UCL's Petrie Museum's 150th anniversary.⁵ There were numerous associated events, such as an evening celebration and an exhibition, and that the print book has kept on selling is largely down to visitors buying it at the museum. It is a highly illustrated, accessible book, intentionally priced at £10 to make it affordable as well as appealing to museum visitors. That the download figures keep growing at a relatively steady pace can perhaps simply be explained by the popularity of the subject of Egyptology, as well as ongoing promotion by the museum.

A striking difference between download figures and print sales can be seen for *Participatory Planning for Climate Compatible Development in Maputo, Mozambique*.⁶ A likely explanation could be that it is very difficult to access the print version in the countries around the world that are potentially most interested in this book. Also, the type of audience might be community based and would therefore find the print and shipping costs of ordering the book online prohibitive. This is a very interesting example of the type of book for which OA is beneficial: There is clear demand worldwide as shown by the download figures, yet the low print sale potential would make it impossible for a commercial publisher to even consider publishing it as a printed book. The book has been downloaded in over 120 countries, demonstrating the global demand for this kind of literature, but the book probably would not have been published at all in traditional form.

Of course, UCL Press's sales and marketing activity is largely geared towards the promotion of the OA version, so this might skew the figures and make our print sales lower than that of a traditional publisher. However,

Title	Publication Date	Total Downloads (27 May 2016)	Print Sales (at end May 2016)	Countries Reached
<i>Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology: Characters and Collections</i> by Alice Stevenson et al	04-Jun-15	4983	629	94
<i>Temptation in the Archives: Essays in Golden Age Dutch Culture</i> by Lisa Jardine	04-Jun-15	4071	206	69
<i>Treasures from UCL</i> by Gillian Furlong	04-Jun-15	1548	127	55
<i>Burning Bright: Essays in Honour of David Bindman</i> by Diana Dethloff et al	11-Sep-15	1823	128	40
<i>Poems of 1890: Herman Gorter translated</i> by Paul Vincent	02-Oct-15	1004	47	42
<i>Biostratigraphic and Geological Significance of Planktonic Foraminifera</i> by Marcelle K. BouDagher Fadel	22-Oct-15	2033	27	91
<i>Suburban Urbanities: Suburbs and the Life of the High Street</i> by Laura Vaughan et al	12-Nov-15	3854	72	89
<i>Participatory Planning for Climate Compatible Development in Maputo, Mozambique</i> by Vanesa Castan Broto et al	13-Nov-15	1531	14	123
<i>How the World Changed Social Media</i> by Miller et al	29-Feb-16	10756	279	135
<i>Social Media in an English Village</i> by Daniel Miller	29-Feb-16	2933	237	95
<i>Social Media in Southeast Turkey</i> by Elisabetta Costa	29-Feb-16	1776	191	84
<i>Discord and Consensus in the Low Countries, 1700-2000</i> by Ulrich Tiedau et al	10-May-16	431	14	28
TOTAL		36743	1971	

since commercial considerations are not among the specific goals of the Press, it is free to publish books that meet a scholarly need and that have a global audience, even when that audience has limited access to print – or perhaps we should say, especially when that audience has little opportunity or means to access books in print form.

A notable recent success is *How the World Changed Social Media*, which has been downloaded over 10,000 times since 29 February 2016 – this is quite an exceptional figure for a scholarly book. Its popularity is due to a number of reasons: The fact that social media is so topical; there are no other global, ethnographic studies of social media; and the text is written in an accessible way, so that the layperson can read and enjoy it. Daniel Miller, the project lead, is a well-known anthropologist who has written many other successful books, so his reputation has also helped to boost interest in the project.

For institutions that publish, such as university presses, making their own academics' work available in OA has significant benefits for the parent institution. The Association of American University Presses identifies several on its website emphasising the considerably wider reach this kind of publishing generates. The benefits identified include the extension of the parent institutions'

reach and influence and the generation of favourable publicity for the parent institution through book reviews and awards.⁷

As John Byron, executive director of the Australian Academy of the Humanities, said, '[A] failure to disseminate research will be read as a failure of quality'.⁸ When universities such as UCL reassert their role in the scholarly communications workflow through their own press and via other OA policies, as well as by diverting budget to support publishing activities, the benefits of reach and therefore reputation, as seen here, can be considerable.

The idea of a switch to full OA for monographs is understandably a challenging one for publishers, not just in terms of cost and revenue, but also in terms of process and distribution channels. Whether a full switch to OA will ever happen, and whether an increase in OA will be undertaken as a deliberate strategy or forced on publishers by funder requirements, author demand, library acquisition policy and budgets remains to be seen. However, if readership becomes the driving force for academics, authors and institutions, then the role of OA publishing is clearly critical.

Notes.

- 1 Barclay, Donald. 'Academic Print Books Are Dying: What's the Future?'. *The Conversation*. 10 November 2015. Web. 1 May 2016.
- 2 Dalton, Margaret Stieg. 'The Publishing Experiences of Historians'. *Journal of Scholarly Publishing* 39.3 (2008): 197-240.
- 3 Ferwerda, Eelco, Ronald Snijder and Janneke Adema. *OAPEN-NL – A project exploring Open Access monograph publishing in the Netherlands: Final Report*. The Hague: OAPEN Foundation, 2013. Web. 21 May 2016.
- 4 Collins, Ellen and Caren Milloy. *OAPEN-UK matched pairs pilot: Final Report January 2016*. OAPEN-UK. January 2016. Web. 1 May 2016.
- 5 See Stevenson, A. E. *The Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology: Characters and Collections*. UCL Discovery. 2015. Web. 1 May 2016.
- 6 See Castán Broto, V., J. Ensor, E. Boyd, C. Allen, C. Seventine and D. Augusto Macucule. *Participatory Planning for Climate Compatible Development in Maputo, Mozambique*. UCL Discovery. 2015. Web. 1 May 2016.
- 7 Armato, Douglas, Steve Cohn and Susan Schott. 'The Value of University Presses'. *Association of American University Presses*. 2015. Web. 1 May 2016.
- 8 Byron, John. 'Foreword'. *Arts of Publication: Scholarly Publishing in Australia and Beyond*. Eds. Lucy Neave, James Connor and Amanda Crawford. Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2007. Print. 7-16, 10.