

Community Gardens

Evin Dalkilic

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Publish or perish. In academia, where impact factors and the reputation of a journal or publisher often make or break scholars' careers, this implies publishing with renowned publishers.

For the big publishing houses in particular, this is a billion-dollar business, and the trend towards Open Access has not changed that. Instead of just shifting the costs onto the readers, it is increasingly also the authors who have to dig into their pockets in order to be able to publish at all. For these so-called Article Processing Charges (APCs), scholars paid an estimated [over one billion US dollars](#) to the five major publishers Elsevier, Sage, Springer-Nature, Taylor & Francis, and Wiley between 2015 and 2018 alone. In addition, there are the revenues that these publishers generate with subscriptions, the licensing of publication workflows, and the [collection and analysis of data](#), the latter being not only a problem for data protection but also for academic freedom (see e.g. [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)). We find here a publication landscape with just a few players sharing the terrain and claiming the acquisitions budgets of university libraries. Anyone who opposes this – scholars as well as librarians – pushes the boundaries of existing conventions, habits, traditions, cultures and constraints of science, and frequently hits a brick wall.

And yet, beyond this walled and grazed landscape – the [Walled Gardens](#), as David Hunter calls them – there are scholars reclaiming parts of the land and raising small community gardens to which everyone has access: no access restrictions, no subscription fees, no APCs. This is called “Diamond OA”, and it is mainly community-driven publications that refuse to build artificial access barriers. They appreciate the freedom that comes with publishing independently of a commercial publisher. They can experiment with formats and writing processes and are free to choose topics and focus because they do not have to sell their content or market it to the highest bidder. They largely rid themselves of the economic considerations which constrain commercial publishers and which are often incompatible with academic values. This, however, is also where the openness of community-driven gardens usually ends, in order to keep away the large, commercially oriented publishers and to guard themselves against being captured.

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But Diamond OA has its price, too. Academic publishing incurs costs and involves a lot of work that has to be paid. And so money ultimately does matter, because how can this be financed? For many, the answer is: [not at all](#). The majority of Diamond OA journals depend on the voluntary work of scholars. They are affiliated with universities or research institutions that, with luck, take on some of the work for them and provide software and servers. The exact costs often remain in the dark, budgets are cobbled together, but somehow this works for a surprisingly long time, until at some point it doesn't.

Why do so many people put themselves through this in the first place? Part of the answer relates to the self-perception of academics and their handling of publishers and journals. As academics, they do not pursue any commercial interests; they are primarily interested in ensuring that the results of their research are published and received as widely as possible. [The idea](#) that academic publishers or journals also align themselves with these values seems almost naïve given the realities of academic publishing. Nevertheless, it is a scientific ideal that is probably shared by many. But is the academic system even designed to sustainably implement such an understanding of value-driven publishing? And if so, what should a model for this look like? Over the next two years, we want to address these and overarching questions in a [project funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research](#).

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Give and take

Compared to the entire publication system, the market for academic publications is [rather small](#). It is mainly academics who read what is published, and it is mainly academic institutions – usually universities and their libraries – that buy, license and subscribe to it.

In this respect, the world of libraries is largely subject to an acquisitions logic that follows economic transactions. It's about exchange relationships: I pay you sum X, in return I get a book, a journal, a journal article. Even collective financing models do not really elude this logic, but merely distribute the costs for the acquisition of services or products among a large number of actors. In the case of open access publications, this makes sense, because ultimately everyone can read and reuse the publications: The whole community benefits, so the burden should also be shared among the community. However, if not enough money is raised, there will be no OA publication.

Yet, many Diamond OA publications do not work this way. Even without secure funding, they usually continue to publish anyway, but in a self-exploitative manner. And precisely because everything is freely available, and because articles and books are published without APCs and paywalls, some libraries take the position that they are legally not entitled to finance open access publications that do not charge any fees, mainly for reasons of cost-effectiveness and economic rigidity. Nobody seems to know for sure whether this is actually the case. To date, there has been no in-depth legal analysis on this issue. With our new project, we are aiming to close this gap.

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Thinking alternatives

A scholarly publication is the result of the work of many: scholars, libraries, publishers. All three groups are dependent on each other: without academics there are no manuscripts and quality control, without publishers there is less (or no) visibility, without libraries there are no organized collections of knowledge. Each of these groups of actors has knowledge, experience and workflows which, when brought together, can lead to really good results. However, so far all three groups have often merely stood side by side instead of really working together and pursuing a common goal: high-quality publications under fair conditions. Negotiating the criteria for high-quality publications and fair conditions is a process that must be continuously monitored and evaluated by the actors involved.

How would it be possible to practice academic publishing as such a collaborative task and question the prevailing acquisition logic? Does this require an independent structure? If so, in what form? How would the governance have to be organized? In order to answer these questions, our new project will first provide an overview of successful [models](#) of collaborative publishing. From this, we want to develop ideas further and discuss them with the stakeholders. Academics, library staff and publishers are invited to join us in thinking about an organizational model for a collaborative Diamond Open Access publishing infrastructure in Germany that meets

the needs of all those involved. This is a prerequisite for academic publishing to become a community undertaking based on academic values such as cooperation and openness, with commercial interests taking a back seat.

The research proposal with detailed information about the project has been published on Zenodo (in German): [10.5281/zenodo.10409394](https://zenodo.org/doi/10.5281/zenodo.10409394).

Parts of this text are based on a presentation by Max Steinbeis and Evin Dalkilic at the re:publica 2023.

