

# Five minutes with John Holmwood and Martin Eve – discussing the future of academic publishing

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Today marks the beginning of Academic Book Week (#AcBookWeek), “the week-long celebration of the diversity, innovation and influence of academic books throughout history”. First established in 2015, #AcBookWeek returns for its second year and will run until 28 January. As part of a varied programme of events, later today **John Holmwood** and **Martin Eve** will speak about the future of academic publishing. Ahead of that event, we were able to hear their thoughts on how academic publishing is changing, open access, what ‘impact’ means to them, and what advice they might offer to early career researchers.



## What do you consider to be the major hurdle for academic publishing to overcome in the next five years?

**John:** The rise of for-profit providers and the development of web-based course modules with integrated content (lecture, film clips, readings) supported by face-to-face, adjunct-delivered tutorials. This is likely to lead to a decline in library purchases of academic print-based texts and replacement by content that can be disaggregated from its ‘carrier’ (i.e. making available electronic chapters and part chapters).



**Martin:** The challenge here is the same as it has been for almost two decades now: how to adapt business models for fair remuneration of publisher labour while also harnessing the dissemination power of the open web. Calls for open access have been ongoing since 2002 but, in many disciplines, it remains an under-realised dream. The challenge is that while subscriptions have worked well for more than half a century, the web fundamentally changes the possibilities for the spread of work. Publishers are going to have to take some risks and experiment with models (and I mean, *new* models, not just article processing charges) to make this work.

## As an academic, how do you see the role of the publisher changing?

**John:** Journal publishing continues to be under pressure for open access content. Possible pressure on monograph publication – though in the UK the Stern recommendations for the Research Excellence Framework and the shift to two items per academic may lead to revival as universities pursue quality outputs. But publishers may need to provide library copies of books with online versions able to be ‘repackaged’ in part for online course material. The HEFCE consultation on Stern has also indicated that it wishes all publications, including monographs, to be available open access for the REF after 2021.

**Martin:** Well, it’s probably worth saying up-front that I’m not a typical academic so my answer may not be reflective of a broader demographic here (I’ve written extensively about scholarly communication and run a publisher myself). But my feeling is that I see the future role of the publisher as filtering, framing and amplifying academic work on the web (silently quoting Michael Bhaskar here) but I don’t necessarily see the functions as working in that order. These act as services to authors and to readers that require labour and in which publishers can participate. In future, I would also like to see less resistance from publishers on preprints (the practice of posting a working copy online) and more emphasis on digitally preserving academic outputs.



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### **In your opinion, what factors should be considered when measuring the impact of a piece of research?**

**John:** In the UK, there is insufficient appreciation of academic publications for wider publics. The REF pushes toward narrow academic audiences and the impact agenda drives academics toward ‘co-production’ with specific users. The emphasis on impact favours instrumental benefits of knowledge, rather than its intrinsic satisfactions for author and readers.

**Martin:** I’m going to answer this in a slightly roundabout way, I’m afraid, since ‘impact’ means many things to many people. In the formal evaluative cultures of the UK REF it pertains to measurable behavioural change, while others take the term to be more about dissemination and general education. In the disciplines in which I work, though, it’s often very hard to measure the types of benefit that one might get from having an educated and engaged general citizenship. The aspect of measurement that I remain interested in, but also sceptical of, is altmetrics; for ‘online attention’ does not equal positive impact even while it may indicate something...

### **What advice would you give to young researchers and academics, embarking on their careers over the next few years?**

**John:** Those in the UK need to keep a clear eye on REF requirements and notice that the requirement of two publications of high quality per REF cycle will enable them to pursue a more differentiated approach to publishing and to the audiences for their research. Possible restrictions on portability of outputs may mean that they need to develop mentoring relationships outside their own institution to keep their plans ‘under wraps’.

**Martin:** Embrace open access publishing. I can’t tell you how many good things have come out of it for me. From emails from non-academics thanking me for letting them read my work through to career benefits. I do want to add: don’t confuse the name of a journal or a publisher with the quality of the work inside; you can choose where to publish and I am opposed to publishers representing themselves as the gatekeepers of prestige when we, as academics, can choose where to publish and where to review. Finally, do not accept intimidating contracts and read

them carefully. Copyright transfer agreements mean that your work will still belong to whomsoever you give it up to 70 years after your death. Royalties for the majority (but not all) of academic work are close to zero, so negotiate with publishers; most are very open to this but academics don't always realise it.

## How do you think academic publishing should embrace interdisciplinary work practices?

**John:** I am cautious about what to recommend here. I think there are two kinds of interdisciplinary research. The first I call critical interdisciplinarity: to engage with wider intellectual issues and challenge boundaries. The second is applied interdisciplinary studies and tends to operate within the comfort zones of existing disciplines and is tied to instrumental interests deriving from the impact agenda. Academic publishing should be careful to maintain a clear distinction between the two and ensure a niche for the former.

**Martin:** The biggest challenge here, I think, is getting peer review to work. Books or articles on, say, religious history, tend to aggravate historians and theologians in equal measure and there's no pleasing everyone. So, working out how to balance any process here such that it is sensitive to the demands of different disciplines may help. I think also that new modes of review, such as post-publication review or open review, could be of benefit here but such moves must be sensitive to disciplinary norms.

## How do you think that innovative publishers can complement the researchers of the future in new ways?

**John:** The push toward OA monograph publishing is going to be a serious concern and will require innovative responses both in terms of business models and forms. It is clear that readers of academic books are quite resistant to online versions and so there needs to be pricing that allows free online access and also access to a print-on-demand version for a supplementary fee. The latter, if priced properly, could be an additional source of revenue in sales to individuals rather than libraries.

**Martin:** As I've indicated above, I am interested in open access, preprints, modifications to the review process, and other aspects of digital practice. I also think, though, that we have a larger looming problem in the sense of the publication of arbitrary digital objects: data and software. Innovative publishers need to start thinking about this now because the challenges are enormous, particularly in terms of digital preservation.

You can join John and Martin at today's event, [Creating the Future of Academic Publishing: Strengthening the Research Ecosystem](#), beginning at 6:30pm. Tickets are available [here](#).

*Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.*

### About the authors

**John Holmwood** is Professor of Sociology at the University of Nottingham. He is a former President of the British Sociological Association (2012-2014) and member of the Expert Reference Group for the HEFCE Report on Open Access and the Monograph (January 2015). He is co-founder of the Campaign for the Public University and co-founder and joint managing editor of *Discover Society* (a free online magazine of social research, commentary and policy analysis).

**Martin Eve** is Chair of Literature, Technology and Publishing at Birkbeck, University of London. He is the author of many journal articles and four books, including *Open Access and the Humanities* (available open access from Cambridge University Press). Martin is also a founder and CEO of the Open Library of Humanities.

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