Collectivity and collaboration: imagining new forms of communality to create resilience in scholar-led publishing

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The Radical Open Access Collective (ROAC) is a community of scholar-led, not-for-profit presses, journals and other open access (OA) projects. The collective promotes a progressive vision for open access based on mutual alliances between the 45+ member presses and projects seeking to offer an alternative to commercial and legacy models of publishing. This article presents a case study of the collective, highlighting how it harnesses the strengths and organizational structures of not-for-profit, independent and scholar-led publishing communities by 1) further facilitating collective efforts through horizontal alliances, and by 2) enabling vertical forms of collaboration with other agencies and organizations within scholarly publishing. It provides a background to the origins of the ROAC, its members, its publishing models on display and its future plans, and highlights the importance of experimenting with and promoting new forms of communality in not-for-profit OA publishing.

Keywords

Radical Open Access Collective; scholar-led publishing; open access; collectivity; collaboration; communality

'We need to ask what it is we are against,
what it is we are for, knowing full well
that this *we* is not a foundation
but what we are working toward.'

Sara Ahmed
Living a Feminist Life (2017)

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Background

In 1996 the National Academies Press (NAP), the publishing arm of the National Academies in the US, began experimenting with publishing its books for free on its website while at the same time charging a fee for the corresponding print editions.[1] In doing so, it became the first publisher experimenting with a hybrid print+digital open access (OA) model for books, a model that was widely emulated afterwards. Open access for scholarly books continued to develop gradually from there, where it benefited significantly from the rise of print-on-demand and digital printing techniques and the advent of open source publishing software. These technological advances provided opportunities to various new players within scholarly publishing – from institutions to communities of scholars – to set up their own digital presses and to experiment with OA publishing. This was especially of relevance to the humanities and social sciences (HSS), disciplines in which, historically, book publishing has played an important role, and where open access had not yet been taken up to the same extent as in the sciences.[2] What stands out in the development of OA book publishing in particular is how these new presses that were set up by universities (e.g. Rice University Press), by libraries (e.g. the Scholarly Publishing Office [SPO] of the University of Michigan Library) and by academics (e.g. re.press) were, and often remained, important trendsetters,

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promoting open access, innovative publishing models and experimental multimodal publication formats – especially when compared to legacy publishers, who have often been more risk-averse where it concerned the development of new publishing models in open access (book) publishing.

This article will focus on two strategies or modes of organization that were taken up by many of these new, often not-for-profit and digital-first, OA publishing initiatives. It will explore how their (relatively) small scale and financial insecurity forced them to focus on creating models of resilience (rather than sustainability),[3] by working both *collectively* (i.e. horizontally within the same sector) and *collaboratively* (i.e. vertically across sectors) for the common good. After briefly outlining the innovations these forms of collaborative and collective publishing enabled, we will look in the second half of this article at the Radical Open Access Collective (ROAC)[4] as a case study of how these organizational structures could work out for not-for-profit scholar-led publishing in particular – a form of publishing that is recently seeing a blossoming in popularity, not least due to the increasing hegemony of commercial publishers and corporate interests in scholarly communication.[5]

> 'creating models of resilience… for the common good'

Reimagining collectivity and collaboration in scholarly publishing

As part of the above-mentioned reorientation of scholarly publishing in favour of digital, not-for-profit and OA options, a new ecosystem of scholar-, library- and university-led publishing projects has emerged.[6,7,8,9,10] Utilizing a variety of community-driven and collaborative publishing models, these projects often combine strengths to maximize resource sharing and the efficiencies that arise from institutional support. This collaborative approach can in many ways be seen as a hallmark of not-for-profit publishing.

For many of those involved in early experiments with OA book publishing in particular, what stands out is that the focus was never *only* on providing online access to scholarly publications but was also about rethinking what an academic publishing *culture* should look like in a digital environment. Taking their inspiration from, amongst others, open source software and gift cultures, community-driven models were developed whereby community members all committed some (or all) of their time to support collective not-for-profit projects, envisioning publishing foremost as a service to the scholarly community. Sharing time freely and gifting labour is something that reaps common benefits, of course, by supporting the collective advancement of scholarship and building (digital) knowledge commons. These community-driven models also align well with, and reflect, core scholarly values of collaboration and communality.

Small institutional, campus-based, independent and scholar-led OA projects, due to their size and often not-for-profit background, do face various structural constraints, from lacking skill sets and experience to insufficient market leverage.[11] However, when taken together, in different constellations, we would argue that these independent community-driven projects have the potential to create a resilient ecosystem to support the scholarly commons. What is needed to enable this is first and foremost a reimagining of what academic collectivity, community and commonality is and could be in a digital publishing environment, especially if these initiatives want to be able to provide a valid alternative to the commercial models and their market-driven focus. As Florian Schneider explains in this respect, new forms of collaboration need to be *imagined*: 'The outcome of a collaboration is rampant, unforeseeable, and always unexpected. Sometimes it may not turn out nicely, it may even be harsh, but one thing is for sure: it cannot be calculated, it has to be imagined.'[12] Reimagining the relations within the publishing system (i.e. beyond a mere *calculative* logic, assessing the sustainability of alternative models) therefore is essential in a not-for-profit OA publishing environment, in order to enable new forms of collaboration. Such a redefining of (the future of) scholarly publishing in communal settings often includes, as we will show, a reassessment of publishing and business models as well as governance structures within publishing, taking open access, a not-for-profit ethos and communality at its core, next to

values of inclusivity, equity, diversity and global justice.[13,14] The diverse constellations of agencies that emerged out of these OA publishing experiments, in the form of collectives, publishing co-operatives or purchasing consortia, have the potential to further transform academic publishing from not-for-profit to low-cost collectively underwritten models. Making use of economies of scale, working from individual projects to contributing to collective and collaborative ones, will allow these projects to retain their independence and to honour their not-for-profit character, while providing a scaleable publishing model that aligns with the ethos of scholar-led publishing. Here, operating communally might aid in overcoming both structural and strategic disadvantages, while maintaining diversity and providing a framework capable of making publishing more resilient.

Two models of collaboration have stood out in these developments, which we illustrate below. Firstly, a model that focuses on *alliances of small independent projects within a certain sector* (such as publishers) *in collectives* (horizontally) to create economies of scale, and secondly, one which encompasses *collaboration across sectors or fields* (vertically) to create multi-stakeholder ecologies.
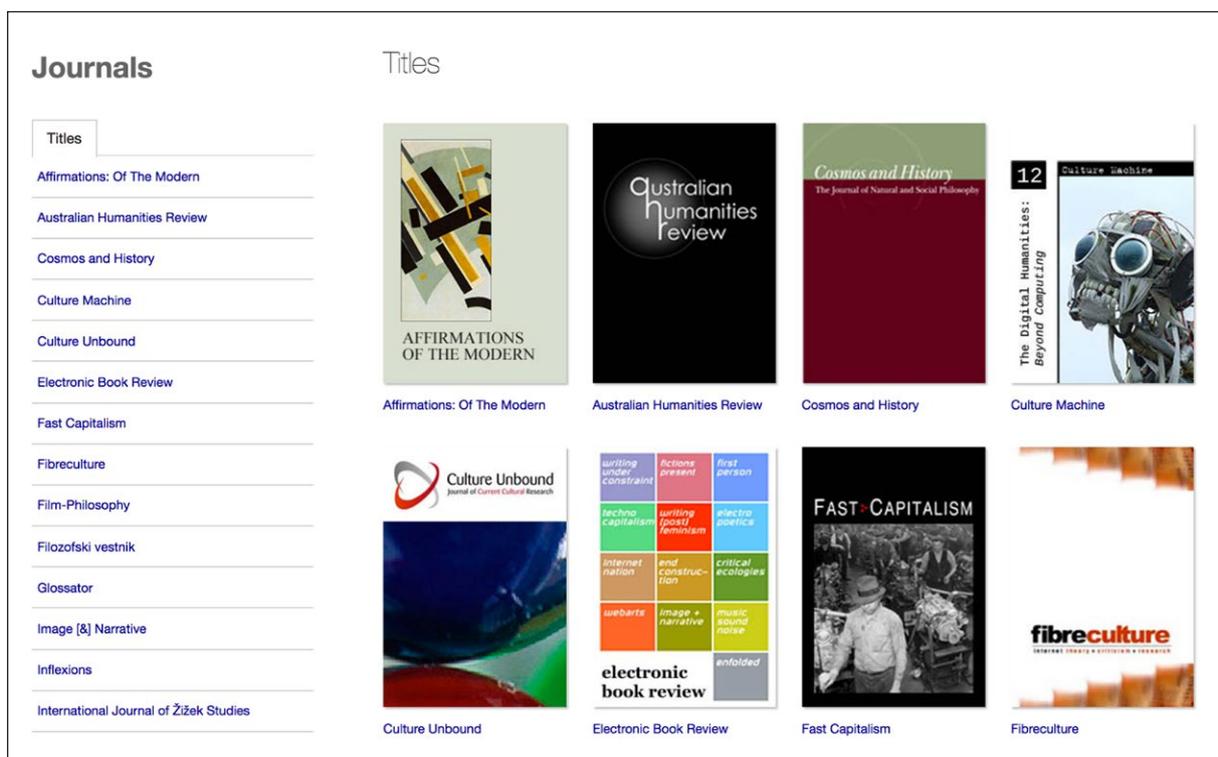

Figure 1. Open Humanities Press journal titles

Horizontal collaboration

Horizontal collaborations in collectives or consortia, facilitated through unions of small/independent presses, or of publishing communities taking on book series or journal projects, can provide mutual aid and logistical support, shared services and best practices. Collectives here function as organizations with a non-hierarchical (or flat or horizontal) structure, where all the members of the collective participate in decision-making processes. These forms of publishing can represent collaboration within scholarly networks, for example, encouraging informal relationships and community-forming between (groups of) scholars interested in helping one another to publish research. The scholar-run Open Humanities Press (OHP) exists as such a community of critical and cultural theorists: it involves multiple, self-governing scholarly groups, organized around journals or book series, and includes academics, librarians, publishers, technologists, journal editors, etc., operating as a radically heterogeneous collective (Figure 1). OHP provides promotional and technical support

'Horizontal collaborations … can provide mutual aid and logistical support, shared services and best practices'

to OA journals that have applied to or have been invited to join the collective. Journals remain completely autonomous in all their functions, though, and continue to operate independently. OHP's books are published in series, each created and managed again by self-organizing and semi-autonomous editorial teams consisting of senior scholars. OHP co-ordinates these groups and manages production and publication, where the books all have a shared technical infrastructure. OHP thus functions as a networked, co-operative and multi-user collective, where authors and editors both internal and external to OHP support one another and share knowledge and skills. In this sense, OHP very much works horizontally in a non-competitive fashion, freely sharing its knowledge, expertise and even publications with other OA presses, including Open Book Publishers and meson press. If, for some reason, OHP, as a peer publishing initiative, should discontinue, the journals remain unaffected as they were all set up independently and continue to operate autonomously within the OHP collective. As David Ottina, one of OHP's directors, has stated, 'The OHP journals collective is a simple, easily implemented effort designed to help journals in the prestige economy while remaining materially resilient'.[15] Meson press, which publishes research on digital cultures and networked media, is set up in a similar manner to an academic co-operative (as are various other academic-led publishing initiatives such as Mattering Press), to stress the network-like structure of the press, as well as its participative and democratic character. As a legal framework, a co-operative enables them to include further members in their network in the future. Collectives are also increasingly common in journal publishing: witness, for example, the Open Library of Humanities (OLH), which brings various OA journals in the humanities together. However, one of the largest current collectives of presses is the Library Publishing Coalition (LPC), a US federation of research libraries involved in publishing support, founded in 2013 by over 60 academic and research libraries.

Vertical collaboration

The LPC's director, Sarah Kalikman Lippincott, explains in a recent article how collectives such as the LPC play an important role in community building, but perhaps even more in community bridging. As she states, this involves 'supporting our members as they identify areas for collaboration not only among libraries but between libraries and their counterparts in the scholarly communication sector. This effort to bridge communities recognizes that library publishing is just one response to gaps in and frustrations with the scholarly communication system'.[16] It is these kinds of *multi-stakeholder collaborations* that form another important strategy in making not-for-profit, independent publishing more resilient. Collaborations involving libraries, universities, funding agencies and infrastructure providers, all with a shared interest in the public value of knowledge, are examples of this. Here, there is scope for thinking of the various not-for-profit entities within scholarly communication as potential community partners in the emerging OA commons of academic publishing. The aim then becomes to realign the existing resources in the system of academic publishing, and to direct them to alternative not-for-profit collaborative models.[17] An early example of such a multi-stakeholder collaboration includes the partnership between the OHP and the SPO at the University of Michigan Library (later redeveloped into MPublishing), a scholar-library publishing partnership that published 15 fully OA books from 2010 to 2014. This partnership explored how a community of scholars and a university library could directly collaborate as partners in book publishing. Both partners gifted services to each other with the shared goal of furthering open access in the humanities, drawing on resource sharing and institutional support, while creating efficiencies in the system.[18,19] Charles Watkinson has noted in this respect that as 'mission-driven, non-profit organizations, university presses and academic libraries should be natural allies in the quest to create a more equitable scholarly publishing system'.[20] Universities themselves can also play an important role in supporting and enabling these kinds of vertical or multi-stakeholder collaborations, by providing funding or in-house support for publishing endeavours, for example, or by setting up OA university presses to strengthen the not-for-profit publishing ecosystem and to provide (their) scholars with

'multi-stakeholder collaborations … form another important strategy'

an alternative to the commercial legacy publishers. This will provide mutual benefit and support to universities too, from the considerable reputational impact a well-supported press or publishing project or platform could bring to a university, to the savings on article- or book-processing charges (APCs/BPCs) that they could make. In the UK, this might also potentially (indirectly) bring in more quality-related research funding via the Research Excellence Framework.

Recent years have seen further innovation and a rising uptake of these kinds of collaborative multi-stakeholder models. For example, consortial funding models, where publishing is funded through library partnerships, collaboratively underwriting the costs of OA (book) publishing, were famously pioneered by Knowledge Unlatched, and are now also utilized by scholar-led entities such as the OLH (which funds a number of OA humanities journals via library partnerships), Open Book Publishers and Language Science Press. Alongside funding, library consortia have also been active in setting up presses, for example Lever Press, a collaborative OA scholarly publishing enterprise which was conceived, governed and funded by a consortium of liberal arts college libraries in the US. At the moment, the Public Knowledge Project's Open Access Publishing Co-operative Study is seeking to assess the viability, potentials and risks of a multi-stakeholder co-operative association for scholarly publishing, which would include journals, societies, libraries and funders, where it aims to redefine the ecology of partnerships as they currently exist between these partners.[21]
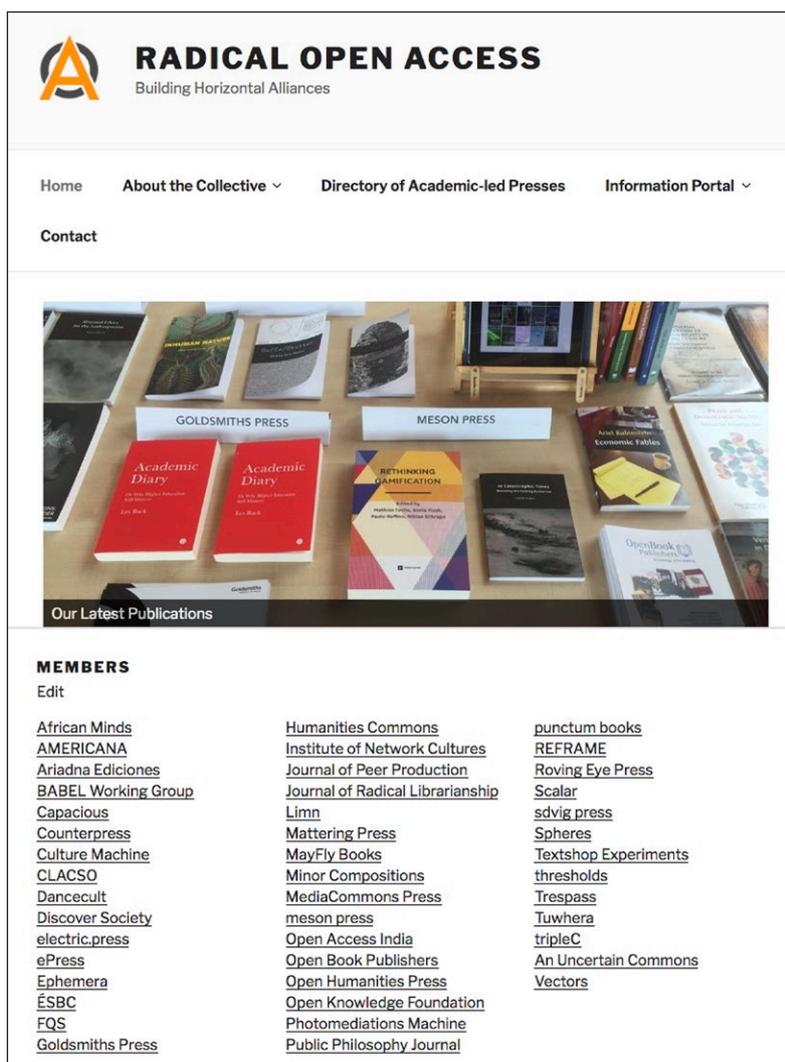
The Radical Open Access Collective
Origins of the collective

The Radical Open Access Collective has its origins in the Radical Open Access Conference held at Coventry University in June 2015.[22] This meeting brought together publishers, scholars and activists all interested in exploring an 'alternative' vision for open access in the HSS. Over two days, the Conference explored some of the 'intellectually and politically exciting ways of understanding open access that are currently available internationally', featuring talks from many scholar-led publishers on critical issues around OA publishing, experimental publishing, chains of equivalence (with other movements and struggles that are also dealing with aspects of openness), the commons, piracy, academic social media and beyond.[23] Towards the end of the two-day meeting, participants discussed the possibility of forming an alliance to support and promote scholar-led forms of open access. Despite the diversity of perspectives and projects on display at the meeting, there was a consensus that a collective would be beneficial for sharing resources and expertise and presenting a united front in advocacy matters. After continuing the discussion online, the ROAC was founded the following year.

'a collective would be beneficial for sharing resources and expertise and presenting a united front in advocacy matters'

The need for a scholar-led organization was further illustrated in a Jisc-commissioned report by Adema and Stone on the rise of academic-led and new university presses.[24] Through a series of interviews with academic-led presses, the authors uncovered a number of different areas in which a collective would be helpful, from practical areas and expertise sharing to issues of solidarity and shared vision. Many of the participants reiterated this call for a consortium or association that could upscale their endeavours significantly. For example, Eileen Joy of punctum books highlighted the benefits of sharing expertise and resources, particularly so that new entrants do not have to learn everything from scratch. Similarly, Joe Deville of Mattering Press suggested that, as academic-led presses do not generally see themselves in competition with each other, the consortium could set up a shared marketing platform, which would allow them to co-promote each other's works, both online and with collaborative book stands at events.[25] Related to this, such an organization could further aid in legitimating scholar-publishing enterprise as a model rather than a disparate series of experiments, i.e. a third option for scholars to pursue in addition to commercial and university press publishing.

Figure 2. ROAC website: list of members

So, based on the contingent and multipolar philosophy of radical open access[26] and in line with the recommendations of the report to Jisc, the ROAC was set up as a further means of working towards a framework of resilience, of strength in diversity and in numbers (Figure 2). Part of the reasoning behind this is that we feel, in the long term, it will be better to stimulate such diversity and support the existence of a plurality of small OA initiatives rather than aim for one single model, platform or grand solution for open access. See for example the ongoing search for *the* sustainable publishing model for OA book publishing, even though the argument can be made that academic book publishing has never been sustainable.[27] A diversity of choice also befits the structure of the humanities, existing as it does out of smaller specialized communities and disciplines. Open access is diverse and complex, and consists of various discourses and motivations, from neoliberal to democratic, that have all shaped its genealogy.[28] The way open access is currently implemented offers us a chance to again experiment with different, more imaginative, speculative futures, to promote a more diverse publishing ecology distributed across different domains, and with that to reconsider what scholarly communication is and what we would like it to be.

'to reconsider what scholarly communication is and what we would like it to be'

One of the chief motivations for open access has been the opposition to the profit margins and business models of large, commercial publishers (such as the Cost of Knowledge boycott of Elsevier).[29] Many responses to these business practices argue that scholarly publishing should be a not-for-profit concern rather than something primarily oriented towards profit for shareholders. Jefferson Pooley, for example, argues that the profit motive is 'misaligned' with the values of academic life, claiming that 'the market's restless rent-

seeking corrodes ideals like unfettered inquiry, knowledge-sharing, and co-operative progress'.[30] Similarly, Sarah Kalikman Lippincott situates library-led publishing as a non-profit endeavour, traditionally subsidized by host institutions and to an extent 'free of the budget pressures' faced by for-profit publishers.[31] This framing has both encouraged and enabled non-profit, scholar- and library-led publishing, which is aligned with the values of the academy over those of shareholders of corporations.
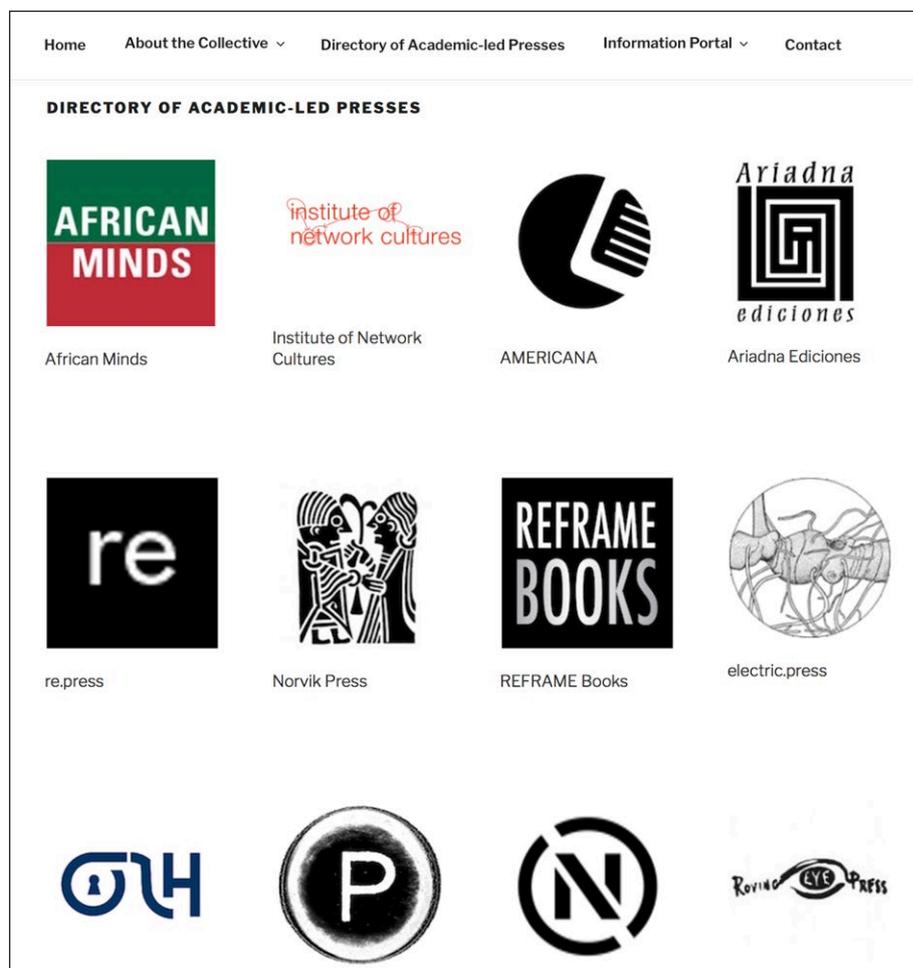

Figure 3. ROAC website: Directory of Academic-led Presses

The web presence of the ROAC, finalized in the summer of 2017, acts itself as a showcase for these unique visions of open access (Figure 3), but also hopes to provide information for those interested in starting their own OA project. The site currently lists resources about the collective (including our philosophy), resources related to scholar-led publishing and a directory of scholar-led projects. The information portal on the website provides a curated list of articles on topics related to scholar-led publishing, from publishing tools and funding opportunities for OA books, to marketing and editorial advice. There is also a curated selection of articles written by members about the various radical conceptions of open access on display in the collective. Via a mailing list, members share advice and offer support from those within the community who have already gained experience with publishing in this manner and are willing to help others in a horizontal and non-competitive manner. This collaborative and open approach is a particularly important guiding principle of the collective. It not only builds trust between members and encourages a gift exchange of resources and ideas between them, but also offers an inclusive and supportive environment for new entrants who may be keen but daunted by many aspects of the publishing process.

'an inclusive and supportive environment for new entrants'

Inclusivity and diversity

The collective currently contains over 40 members, with many more individuals participating through its mailing list and beyond. Members publish primarily in the HSS in a wide range of formats from journals and monographs to more experimental publications. The collective

also strives to represent and support the global diversity of scholar-led publishing projects from scholars of all career levels. This involves nurturing cultures of knowledge associated with spaces that are 'outside' the walls of the university as they are conventionally conceived, as well as ensuring para-academics,[32] precariously employed scholars, and those living outside the global North and West, are all able to have a voice. Forms of collectivity need to include this diversity in their modes of organization and a number of models are on display in the collective that support these aims in various ways. Crucially, it is this provision of space for diversity and the promotion of difference that sustains the collective rather than works against it.

Despite the clear preference for non-profit publishing, member presses and projects range from those with formalized models for revenue generation and sustainability, such as Open Book Publishers and punctum books, to completely DIY approaches with little to no financial support or commercial orientation, such as Mayfly Books and Roving Eye Press, who instead rely solely on small grants and gifted labour for their projects. Many member projects are situated within and/or scaffold upon a university setting, such as The Institute of Network Cultures and Goldsmiths University Press, while others act as disparate networks of scholars from a wide range of locations and institutional attachments. As a non-competitive and non-hierarchical collective, these differing levels of support and institutional attachment offer the opportunity to share expertise and knowledge on successful (and unsuccessful) experiments in our various projects. This collaboration ensures that members can learn from one another's experiences and not continually reinvent wheels in isolation, as opposed to private forms of publishing in which commercial knowledge is proprietary and 'commercially sensitive'.

> 'collaboration ensures that members can learn from one another's experiences'

Part of being a heterogeneous collective means that members experiment in a variety of practices and forms of publishing. Journals such as *Vectors, Thresholds* and *Textshop Experiments* publish experimental, innovative and hybrid works that confront traditional notions of paper-centric publishing and seek to fully explore and utilize the potential of digital environments for new forms of readership and textuality.[33] Other projects seek to engage with traditional and taken-for-granted understandings of contemporary academic practices. Projects such as Humanities Commons experiment with notions of academic social media self-branding, in opposition to for-profit, data-driven companies such as ResearchGate and Academia.edu, while the *Journal of Peer Production* and the *Public Philosophy Journal* operate non-standard forms of peer review with a view to making the process more collegial and less focused on the evaluative and gatekeeping aspects of scholarly review. Many of these practices strive to reorient publishing as a form of *care* – care for others, for processes, for the work involved in all aspects of the supply chain, and for the (content of the) publication – rather than being focused purely on the outcomes of the publishing process. Such a stance has very real implications for the future of research assessment, where, increasingly, research is being created with an eye on how the finished product will be considered and evaluated either by market-driven publishers and presses, or in the light of often metric-driven research evaluation frameworks. This enforces particular forms of scholarship, which tend to be tailored to the kind of research that editors, reviewers and assessors can readily quantify. In turn, this is cultivating a conservative environment that tends to discourage the publication of creative, avant-garde, experimental and boundary-pushing scholarship, with publishers, more often than not, prioritizing a return on investment over works of diversity.

The collective also represents a number of projects that prioritize a variety of audiences, authors and global publics in their publishing practices. El Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales (CLACSO) itself represents a collective of publishers from Latin America, the Caribbean and beyond, aiming to 'promote social research to combat poverty and inequality, strengthen human rights and democratic participation'.[34] Presses such as Éditions Science et Bien Commun, sdvig press and African Minds represent communities outside the global North and West, each offering a reminder that OA publishing should represent the voices of diverse communities. In a similar way, members such as Mattering

Press, *Capacious* and the *Public Philosophy Journal* aim to support and bring to the fore the work of early-career researchers, who themselves have historically had a fraught relationship with open access.[35]

The ROAC thus represents a diverse range of commitments from a wide range of publishing projects. These are just a handful of the values on display in the network; there are many more political and ethical approaches to publishing within the ROAC. It is important to note, however, that the collective's mission is to support and provide space for a range of values associated with OA publishing, rather than funnelling them into one homogeneous size that fits all. Similarly, the collective is concerned to question easy distinctions between open and closed, preferring to explore questions around *openness* and *access* (not to mention *transparency* and *secrecy*, *radicality* and *collectivity*) in a more rigorous and nuanced fashion.[36]

> 'the collective's mission is to support and provide space for a range of values'

Future developments: towards vertical collaborations?

Having highlighted some of the practices of the members of the ROAC, it is worth finishing by looking to its future. As membership grows, we hope to offer a collective voice on a range of issues associated with publishing and open access specifically. Open access is on the agenda for a number of institutions, funders and countries, and the ROAC is keen to have a voice when it comes to policy, particularly to ensure that scholar-led and not-for-profit publishing is reflected in such policies, rather than a single focus on hybrid and APC/BPC-based forms of commercial open access. The collective also hopes to make use of its scale to attend events on behalf of each other and offer a shared presence for marketing at various conferences. Ultimately, such a presence is designed to encourage and support other scholarly communities to publish their own work and get involved with radical open access. One way we hope to achieve this is through a toolkit that will list resources for academics interested in setting up their own presses. This will contain template legal resources, such as contracts and documents for registering a business as a charity, alongside a host of open source tools for publishing research. It will also contain practical advice on some of the things scholars need to consider when running a publishing operation, such as the production process and supply chain, book cover design and issues around publication ethics, among many others.

The toolkit is intended to benefit more than just scholar-led presses and the collective hopes to collaborate and build vertical alliances with other not-for-profit entities working in publishing, such as libraries and university presses, both established and new. In doing this, we hope to work towards better library integration for new/small publishers and to collaborate on the future of infrastructure design for progressive OA projects in the humanities, social sciences and beyond. This means both setting up and collaborating with projects engaged in thinking about the future(s) of open access from an infrastructural perspective. It also means exploring the lessons learned and benefits already gained from previous projects in these areas, such as the various projects around OA monograph publishing in the US funded by the Mellon Foundation[37] and the large-scale European projects, including HIRMEOS[38] and OpenAIRE,[39] which are currently running. Rather than enforcing particular models, one-size-fits-all platforms, or 'flavours' of open access, these initiatives should seek to support open access at the grassroots level by providing small collectives of scholar-led publishers with tools and resources to aid their resilience. Large-scale investments in open source, not-for-profit infrastructure and digital publishing services will bring additional benefits to scholar-led and not-for-profit publishing initiatives, which will further help us to reimagine this 'rampant, unforeseeable, and always unexpected' ecosystem of non-competitive OA projects.

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