

The ‘Guide to Open Access Monograph Publishing for Arts, Humanities and Social Science Researchers’, produced by OAPEN and funded by AHRC and JISC, provides a good deal of common sense and useful information about this knotty and rapidly developing scene. We share its goal of extending open access to cover the full range of academic publishing in the arts and humanities, while preserving academic freedom and quality. But we write to express some concern that, by adopting a single model based on some ‘first principles’ generated by a very different kind of open-access movement ten years ago, largely driven by STEM journal publishing, it is failing to address the real ‘common concerns’ of the arts and humanities community and underestimating the obstacles that face the development of workable models for open-access monograph publishing. In other words, it runs the risk of re-running the heated and lengthy debates that followed from the Finch Report, in which a one-size-fits-all policy had gradually to be adapted to the distinctive publication patterns and requirements of the arts and humanities. It would be far better to learn from those debates and build these distinctive features of the arts and humanities into policy-making from the beginning – all the more important as we turn to monographs, which are much more important to arts and humanities publishing than to STEM.

Four major concerns about OA monograph publishing have been voiced already at some length by the arts and humanities community, but are not confronted head-on in this guide.

First, there is no doubt that monograph publishing in the arts and humanities requires a more substantial revenue stream even than journal publishing in the arts and humanities (which is not cheap either). Monographs need mentoring, peer review (which in monograph publishing is paid for, unlike in journal publishing), considerable editorial work, and extensive copy-editing and proofreading. It is of course possible to produce monographs without these things, but not without considerable sacrifices of quality. The guide does not in our view consider carefully enough the risks that if revenue streams are reduced by OA then quality may suffer as well. For example, it says, ‘There is a perception that in an open access model, peer review is not undertaken or that it is not undertaken at the same level as for other books sold under the traditional model. This is not the case.’ (25) Such a categorical statement is not based on any appraisal of the peer-review undertaken by existing OA publishers as opposed to traditional publishers. It is based only on the testimony of OA publishers themselves that they are proceeding just like traditional publishers. The existence of ‘predatory’ OA publishers is acknowledged but then immediately disregarded, as ‘they are completely unconnected to open access publishing’, which by definition is not the case.

Second, given the need for a revenue stream, there is a great danger that arts and humanities authors will be forced to ‘pay to play’. Although the guide offers considerable discussion of various business models, it does not confront fully the hazards they pose. For example, the ‘author payment’ model is discussed without reference to the fact that those arts and humanities researchers (unlike STEM researchers) most dependent on publishing their first monograph often have no external funding or even any institutional support. The ‘new university press’ model is discussed without reference to the fact that this model often prioritizes employees of the university in question, which again disadvantages early-career researchers without stable employment and may undercut quality-control based on institutional self-interest. The ‘freemium’ model is discussed without reference to the limited value that the ‘premium’ features may add for many arts and humanities researchers (‘links to the research data’ are more relevant to STEM and social science monographs than to humanities monographs, most of which are based on data not created or owned by the researcher).

Third, precisely because humanities researchers do not generally own their own data, the problems of providing open access to data owned by third parties pose serious obstacles to all kinds of e-publication, especially open access under the liberal licences approved by this guide, which removes control from the rights holders. The principal obstacle is cited as rights owners ‘not having a policy’ (33). In fact many rights owners – of artistic, musical and literary copyrights in particular – do have a policy, which is to charge exorbitant sums for OA-licensed work (as the guide acknowledges) or to deny permissions altogether (which the guide doesn’t consider). There are many instances already of online material being blanked out because rights owners refused even online rights, not to mention OA. The guide acknowledges ‘that it’s not a problem of open access per se - it’s a challenge for all electronic books’ (33), which only suggests that third-party rights are rather more problematic than less.

Fourth, the guide does not address at all the question of re-use, which as the authors know has been among the most controversial features of the post-Finch debate. Many re-uses are tantamount to what arts and humanities researchers consider to be plagiarism, which has led HEFCE to adopt a policy that does not require the most permissive licenses. Here again we feel that the guide has taken predetermined ‘principles’ as a starting-point rather than the ‘common concerns’ of stakeholders. For example, the OASPA criteria – which include ‘The license policy should allow for the broadest re-use of published material possible’ – are described but the consequences of and controversies over ‘the broadest re-use’ are not explained (26). It is also suggested that text and data mining ‘would not be possible’ (34) without the most permissive licences – a claim that remains highly contentious, as HEFCE has acknowledged in its current policy. Reference is made to OAPEN’s earlier guide on CC licences for arts and humanities and social science researchers, but much the same critique can be made of that guide, which again does not address the ‘common concerns’ about re-use (for example, the fact that CC BY licences require indications in re-use that texts have been changed but not how they have been changed).

The authors of this guide are of course entitled to advocate for any kind of ‘open access’ that they choose. But a guide which claims to be ‘working with all the key stakeholders to identify and discuss’ their concerns (2) needs to be more open about what are those concerns and frank about which of those concerns their own preferred form of open access does not yet address. The concerns we voice above have been aired in many forums over the last few years, by dozens of learned societies which represent thousands of arts and humanities academics across the spectrum, and in the Crossick Report. They need to be taken into account in any move to craft a policy for open-access monographs, a move we consider to be intrinsically desirable, but not simple.

African Studies Association of the UK
Architectural Humanities Research Association
Association of Adaptation Studies
Association of Hispanists of Great Britain and Ireland
Association of University Professors and Heads of French
British Association for American Studies
British Association for Slavonic and East European Studies
British Philosophical Association
Council of University Classics Departments
National Association for Music in Higher Education
National Association of Writers in Education

Oral History Society
Political Studies Association
Royal Historical Society
Royal Musical Association
Society for French Studies
Society for the Promotion of Hellenic Studies
Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies
Theology and Religious Studies UK
University Archaeology UK
University Council for Modern Languages

These subject associations and learned societies are members of the Arts and Humanities Alliance (www.artsandhums.org). For information about the Arts and Humanities Alliance, or to respond to this letter, please reply to Peter Mandler, President, Royal Historical Society (pm297@cam.ac.uk)

Additions after 19.10:

Association of Art Historians
Economic History Society