



SPECIAL SECTION

Open Access Books

Against book enclosures: Moving towards more diverse, humane and accessible book publishing

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Abstract

Matthew Gandy's Commentary in *Area* (2023) criticised the decision of the national funder UKRI to mandate that all books resulting from the research that it funds must be published open access (OA) from 2024. This raises many issues of importance to geographers. We argue that scholars in the discipline need to fight for affordable and ethically produced OA books, not 'legacy' modes of publishing. In particular, books produced by scholar-led OA presses will not harm the reputation of departments or individual scholars, and they also have the potential to reduce significant financial barriers to accessing books across the globe. A more powerful critique must be to challenge the continued 'enclosure' of books, and the denial of OA by academic publishers and university presses.

KEYWORDS

geography, Open Access publishing, scholarly publishing, social sciences and humanities, UKRI

1 | INTRODUCTION

Matthew Gandy (2023, p. 565) argued that, in Britain at least, 'Academic books are under threat' from an announcement made by the country's major public research funder, UKRI, in December 2022 that 'From 1 January 2024, UKRI's open access policy will apply to monographs, book chapters and edited collections that need to acknowledge UKRI funding'.¹ For monographs to which the policy applies, £3.5m per year is available to help academic presses to comply with this policy. UKRI also suggests this fund will be held centrally and will encourage submissions from a diversity of monograph business models, including 'diamond' OA publishing. In future grants, up to £10,000 can be claimed for OA book charges.²

The commentary expressed strong objection to this new policy on several grounds, especially if it also becomes formalised in the assessment of British university research through the Research Excellence Framework (REF). To

This commentary is part of a forthcoming collection responding to Matthew Gandy's 2023 commentary 'Books under threat: Open access publishing and the neo-liberal academy.'

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summarise, Gandy worries that some ‘book processing charges’ (BPCs) will have to be borne by authors or their institutions instead of readers, which is expensive. Secondly, he fears the ‘professional synergy between author and publisher’ will somehow be lost in Open Access (OA) book publishing. Thirdly, he believes the ‘cultural milieu’ of the book as a ‘tangible artefact’ (p. 566) that is appreciated and debated, will suffer in a variety of ways. Gandy also makes the criticism that ‘the aspiration to write ambitious books with prestigious academic publishers’ will suffer under the UKRI proposals, assuming that OA books are somehow less prestigious—he questions their ‘protection of academic rigour’ (p. 567). Lastly, he suggests that paying to publish OA books will be ‘likely to increase the existing market dominance of commercial academic publishers’ (p. 567).

In our own commentary, we set out a different view of the push and pull factors seemingly driving academics away from the nobler ‘long-form’ of the scholarly book in geography and other disciplines. Our evidence base comes from our work as individuals heavily involved in scholar-led (Steiner, 2023) modes of OA publishing for a worldwide audience in Geography, Area Studies and Anthropology. We have edited and published journals, but with important forays into OA book publishing in partnership with Verso, Cambridge and Westminster University Presses, and ANU Press.

2 | THE WITHERING ACADEMIC BOOK?

Along with the much-debated European Plan S proposal to mandate OA publishing for journal articles funded by its signatories, the UKRI’s endorsement of an OA book mandate will of course have some drawbacks. For instance, authors not directly financed by UKRI may lack institutional support to fund their BPCs as a result of the casualisation of staffing in higher education and declining budgets in UK universities. A general critique of OA book publishing, however, which Gandy’s commentary offers, overlooks several key issues. There are four important aspects of the gradual shift to OA publishing for books requiring further consideration:

- The rights of the reader. Gandy’s argument against a British OA mandate is unlikely to benefit the majority-world readership (including scholars in the Global South, independent researchers and citizen scientists), many of whom simply cannot afford, or even obtain, hard copy volumes, or e-books sold at commercial prices. This also includes the majority of students we teach. Scholarly publication has a global audience, expanding well beyond the needs of UK scholars. A UK OA mandate will, we think, be a positive thing: it will flow through to dramatically increase the availability of UK scholarship in book form worldwide, paralleling the very different and well respected system in Latin America, where between 51% and 95% of scholarly books are available in OA, largely free of charge, as well as many in hard copy form (Colodrón, 2018).
- The enormous efforts made by innovative OA publishers in the social sciences and humanities need greater recognition. The work of scholars like Martin Paul Eve and Caroline Edwards at Open Library of Humanities, Gary Hall and colleagues at Open Humanities Press, and Joe Deville and six colleagues who established Mattering Press in 2001 all have a UK base. Their aim was in part to address the high cost of academic books to readers, but also to support scholar-led initiatives rather than commercial publishing. Their presses have been successful in both regards. MayFly, Open Book Publishers, Mattering Press and other more recently established OA university presses such as Westminster and LSE, and hybrid presses at Manchester, Liverpool and Bristol, are now part of a UK effort underpinned by millions of pounds of funding to develop great, and career-compatible, OA humanities and social science books.³ They have also developed the software architecture needed to support them (Adema et al., 2022). Costs of production are no longer restricted by the need to raise BPCs from authors alone, given that libraries and funders also contribute through a variety of schemes and funding models.
- In addition, the *ethics* of publishing should direct geographers, particularly those espousing critical values, towards *not* publishing with the more commercial publishers, several of whom have very high net profits driven by a very different mindset to that of their authors.⁴ Previous work signalled the need for a much better developed ethical position for scholars writing in journals, faced with the inequalities present across the commercial political economy of publishing (Batterbury et al., 2022; Pia et al., 2020). As we argue below, ethical considerations should be extended to the ‘long-form’ as well. As part of this, publishing OA and with presses with whom your values are aligned, is ethical, and it extends readership.
- Finally, we do not believe that academics like ourselves, and many geographers, have fully metabolised the *commercialisation of the university* just yet (Hall, 2021; Rustin, 2016), enough to consider personal prestige and career advancement over the first three considerations. Many of us are not fully compliant with some of the practices that Gandy mentions, like playing the REF game, and seeking out prestigious publishers, especially if we take a global view of

scholarship (Connell, 2019). Scholars also resist heightened competitiveness, fight precarity, and dislike quantitative research indicators (Davi et al., 2021). These sentiments emerge in a context where, within a commercially profitable publishing system, publicly financed academic research is treated as a club good—a highway robbery. For instance, the point could be made that all publicly financed scholarly work in Britain (the object of the new UKRI OA policy) has *already* been paid for by the public through direct or indirect taxation, and so they have the right to read it.⁵

We feel that the publishing choices preferred in the commentary—continuing to publish physical books with recognised ‘legacy’ companies, university presses and perhaps some smaller specialist publishers—does not take us towards addressing these four points adequately. To some extent the issue is generational and transformational: publishing has moved on, and so has the readership. In the discipline of geography, an ‘excellent’ hard-copy book is no more likely to cement a career than an ‘excellent’ and more widely read OA one. This might be sad for scholars who cut their teeth in earlier decades, when there was time, and more paid work, to write and to afford to purchase academic books. The transformation of academic publishing also has had positive outcomes. One is that we now have presses controlled by scholars themselves, allowing for experimentation and some escape from neoliberal profit-maximising motives.

3 | ON AFFORDABILITY

We challenge the existence of constraints on the affordability of books, but also when an author fails to consider the ethics of a publisher. Publishing a hardback book at £100+ with an academic publisher that has a high-profit margin in one of the world’s ‘most greedy’ commercial sectors is not an ethical practice (Fazackerley, 2023). The commentary flags the true cost of producing high-quality monographs, but in terms of honoraria for reviewers and rising production costs, without mentioning high sales prices. Gandy does say ‘Duke, Harvard and MIT already offer a range of scholarly books at very competitive prices’ (p. 568) but the costs of reference books and handbooks in particular appear to defy logic, unless perhaps one considers that price elasticity is compromised in a captive market (Pia & Zerilli, 2022).⁶ Ethical publishing demands that profit margins are kept in check across the OA sector, after ensuring labour is justly compensated. The scholar-led OA sector that we support works differently to the new breed of independent British fiction publishers that also have small margins, although both take risks and are concerned with quality over profit (Cummins, 2023).

The conventional hierarchy of academic book publishers is led in Britain by ‘prestige’ university presses, headed by Cambridge (CUP) or Oxford University Press. They work at the cutting edge of a publishing market shaped around commercial giants and threatened by continuous cuts to library and public funding (Staiman, 2023). But precisely because their ‘legacy’ is increasingly menaced by ever-squeezed revenues, they can be quick to enter into Faustian bargains with corporate interests or censorship, as when CUP locked access to 315 articles in the prestigious journal *The China Quarterly* to maintain access to the lucrative market in the People’s Republic of China (Franceschini & Loubere, 2018). We believe the cutting edge in Britain is held by OA publishers owned and run by academics themselves, where ethical considerations are frontstage. In this respect, it occurs to us that Gandy’s commentary may in fact be conflating the mode of publishing with definitions of quality and prestige, considerations that should be kept productively apart in arguments for or against OA.

Crit-geog-forum, the listserv providing an outlet for the discussion of critical and radical perspectives in geography, posts requests almost every week for electronic copies of books or chapters, from scholars around the world as well as in the UK who have no realistic or affordable access to that research material. The UKRI policy on OA would assist them. On the BPCs payable by authors to OA commercial publishers, Gandy is correct that these are high (one of our own books had a charge of £13,000 levied in 2022). But there are wide variations. MayFly Books, which has a modest output, has published interesting books like Hall’s (2021) reflections on the neoliberal university. It does not charge authors or online readers. Their website exemplifies a common philosophy in the sector:

MayFly publishes high-quality books that are available free of charge (as PDF) and as affordable paperbacks. Mayfly does not charge any book processing fees from authors. Thus, the press is a truly not-for-profit operation. It publishes books that matter, and, at present, this involves bypassing the ‘publishing’ industry, which is no longer in public hands and hence fails to represent any public.⁷

Similarly, Open Book Publishers, begun in Cambridge in 2008 by academics frustrated with specialist and commercial presses, publishes a wide range of social science and humanities volumes, controls quality tightly, and does not charge BPCs unless authors can access funding. They track strong worldwide readership, and their books were submitted to the last REF assessment, a point we return to later.

There are also a number of high-quality university presses operating as fully non-profit, OA publishers. The ANU Press at The Australian National University uses rigorous peer review and publishes a large range of academic monographs and journals. There are no fees charged to ANU authors, but some can be charged to scholars wholly from other universities. We do not see evidence that OA publishers like this one produce ‘inferior quality print-on-demand versions’ (Gandy, 2023, p. 568), including the ones where we have published. These presses also produce ‘tangible artefacts’ through low-priced and decent print on demand copies, as do many publishers. If there is a decline in editorial and production standards we see it more in commercial publishing, squeezing revenue in any way possible. Operations such as ANU Press are not causing a decline of the scholarly book, but maintain their quality while pushing against the neo-liberal control of knowledge.

If an institution like the ANU can operate in this way, then wealthier institutions—like CUP for example—could also do so with a shift in perspective and a reorientation in priorities. A close look at the way that academic publishing is currently organised reveals that it is not the shift to non-profit OA that is unaffordable, but rather the current status quo. Institutions of higher education and particularly their library budgets are currently being drained by hugely expensive subscription deals with commercial publishers, and the high cost of some academic books. The APC for *Nature*, for example, is £8890 and other ‘top’ journals are also high. Data obtained using Freedom of Information requests show that UK universities paid some £950.6 million to the world’s 10 biggest publishing houses between 2010 and 2019 (Stuart, 2020). In Sweden, a country like the UK where there is a national consortium to deal with commercial publishers, the cost of journal subscriptions and APCs combined was 771 million SEK (£58 million) in 2021 alone (Loubere et al., 2023).

If we pause to consider how much our universities (through libraries) are paying to these publishers on a yearly basis, it quickly becomes apparent that there is more than enough money in the system to properly finance high-quality OA presses to meet our journal and monograph publishing needs. If anything, small OA presses should now work to bring themselves more attention by partnering with like-minded publishers and libraries to improve discoverability, an issue that some of us are trying to address via mutuality, cooperation and peer oversight (Brackenbury, 2022).

4 | A FLOURISHING OA BOOK LANDSCAPE

Attending conferences on OA publishing—the one organised annually by the Open Access Scholarly Publishing Association (OASPA) is one example—suggests a vibrant field comprising scholars and publishers, highly attentive to considerations of justice and accessibility, as well as experimentation. The cold hand of the market is less visible in this sector, which is adapting rapidly to increasing publishing demands and reader requirements. It is also ‘convivial’, as OA book launches illustrate. The annual report of Open Book Publishers (OBP) states that in 2022 ‘readers from all countries, states and territories in the world’ accessed at least one book on their platform. OBP books currently have 80,000 readers each month.⁸ All of this, at no ongoing cost to authors or readers, thanks to the financial support of over 250 academic libraries located in more affluent countries.

A ‘prestigious’ book is important for those wishing to pursue academic careers, Gandy (p. 567) argues, particularly in North America, but the OA strategies of ‘prestigious’ university presses are rapidly evolving. One, MIT Press, has recently been endowed with \$10 million to publish OA books and journals in fields ranging from science and technology to the social sciences, arts and humanities.⁹ UCL Press in the UK has followed. Those of us who regularly review job applications and tenure cases have moved on from considering the prestige of the publisher in such decisions: it is the quality of the work that counts, following the DORA Declaration which is designed to overcome the often unconscious influence exerted by the prestige presses and places of publication in general.¹⁰ If anything, an OA publication now counts as highly positive, showing the candidate’s commitment to making work available widely. As others have argued, good refereeing, publication standards and layout, and professionalism abound in the OA sector (Suber, 2012).

There is a further argument about support for the ‘prestigious university press book’. It reveals entrenched hierarchies existing in, but not constrained to, British higher education. Several young OA presses are based at ‘newer’ universities and considered by some to be in an entirely lower league than more established institutions (Peck, 2018). We should not hold implicit attachment to this kind of hierarchical thinking, which is of course at odds with progressive and critical geographical thought and positionality. Where prejudice exists, it is acutely and regularly felt by academics in lower-ranked British universities. The new requirement by UKRI may well go some way towards addressing this if it enhances the number of good books published with smaller and newer OA university presses. This may, in the longer term, level out the playing field. Certainly many young scholars—even those who graduated from prestigious universities—value the ethics of OA publishing as outlined earlier over any alleged ‘prestige’ conferred by more outdated models.

5 | THE REF

We think the UK Research Excellence Framework (REF) is unlikely to cause damage to academic conviviality if it institutes a strong shift towards the submission of OA books. This shift is actually desirable. There has been concern that centralised national research funding like UKRI's could bulwark the profits of the existing Euro-American academic publishing conglomerates (Aguado-López & Becerril-Garcia, 2020). Also that the REF inherently favours the 'short-form' of multi-authored articles over the 'slow' scholarship of scholarly and 'trade' books. The choices made by scholars and departments already participating in this exercise provide some guidance.

One of us is employed by the Anthropology Department that had the top overall profile in the last round of the REF. It submitted around half of the outputs compared with the second in standing (48 against 81) but its ratio of authored books was twice as high (16% against 8%). We think most of these would be considered 'trade' books by Gandy.¹¹ Out of eight authored books, *only two* were available in OA format before submission (the second ranked department had zero). Overall, around 190,000 research outputs were assessed in the REF2021, 86,000 of which were OA compliant, or around 120,000 if we account for various forms of access exceptions. Of these, only 67 were single authored or co-edited books (roughly the 0.5% of the total number of books submitted).¹² These numbers go some way towards suggesting that, at least in the discipline of anthropology, more—not less—OA must be welcomed (in geography, *zero* OA books were submitted by the top ranked department). Finally, as a few of us can testify, to REF assessors the place of publication (when it is disclosed to them) is not relevant and must not be used as a proxy measure for excellence.¹³

6 | CONCLUSIONS

Academic books are not under threat from the UKRI's decision on OA book publication, and it will have little to do with whether geographers continue to publish books or not. Matthew Gandy's intervention has hopefully recentred the OA conversation around the future of the academic book as a discrete technology of knowledge production. We agree with him that the stakes here are higher than they appear. We feel, though, that an opportunity has been lost to mount a more important critique not just against OA policies in the UK higher education sector, but relative to how the increasing commercialisation of academia and academic publishing is hollowing out those very policies, to the point of questioning the foundations of why someone would wish to author an academic book in the first place.

The whole publication sector is in transformation. Positively, we have identified that expanded access is obviously beneficial for colleagues and students around the world who work or study in institutions that cannot afford books. It is beneficial also for our institutions and libraries, which are currently strapped for resources due to the huge sums they have to pay these publishers for journal subscriptions and a dwindling number of very expensive books now available in different formats. The equalities sought in the vibrant OA movement over decades, applied to book publishing, are a cause for celebration, leading to our high-quality work being accessible by almost everybody. These transformations do not erase hard copies, but increase accessibility. In this regard, the establishment of a respected scholar-led geography E-Press, along the lines of the former Praxis (e)Press that was free to readers, would be greatly welcomed, as it would expand access to the discipline while opening the field to geographers interested in developing their ideas in book form (by comparison, a new Radical Geography series was started with Brill and Haymarket Books in 2023, but the BPC is £8580!).¹⁴

Admittedly, a managerially compelled transition towards a fully OA scholarly publishing system may hold some risks, especially when this is led by under-examined norms supporting the self-righteous universalisation of Western scholarship. As Thomas Hervé Mboa Nkoudou has recently argued, OA scholarship can indeed be seen as both a 'poison' and a 'cure' in the context of African universities, where locally produced scholarship and epistemologies are provincialised by the growing availability of anglophone or francophone OA publications (2020). Another risk lies in the poorly understood, researched and regulated relation that OA content and platforms entertain with data brokering and the textual datasets of large language models—something we had no space to address in this response (see Andrews, 2020).

Reflecting on Gandy's intervention from the vantage point offered by the fast-changing scholarly publishing ecosystem in the UK, Europe and beyond, we conclude that, if there is a tragedy here it is not the decline of the printed book, but the threat of the 'anticommons'. Within the commercial neoliberal academic model that we have learned to coexist with, only very few can afford the time to write, read closely or otherwise do justice to the 'excellently crafted book' ideal. Moreover, the general public largely ignores the existence of such books, squandering arguably countless opportunities for cultural and collective advancement. In this climate, advocating for a last-ditch defence of the publishing aristocracy

and their traditions, no matter how exquisite and socially gratifying these may be, equates to holding back a radical OA critique of the status quo. This, we believe, does a disservice to the large majority of people who stand to benefit from more open and accessible scholarship.

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ENDNOTES

¹By which they mean, free to read. See UKRI's open access policy update published online on 15 November 2023. Available at: <https://www.ukri.org/news/update-on-ukri-open-access-policy-and-fund-for-books> [Accessed 15th December 2023].

²<https://www.ukri.org/manage-your-award/publishing-your-research-findings/open-access-funding-and-reporting/> [Accessed 15th December 2023].

³See details of the 2023 Open Book Futures project led by Lancaster University. Available online at <https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/news/58-million-project-to-deliver-a-more-sustainable-future-for-open-access-books>. An up-to-date catalogue of OA books published by these presses can be found online at <https://openbookcollective.org/>.

⁴Wiley's recent cancellation of its geography book series mentioned by Gandy, and the mass walkouts from Elsevier and Wiley journals occasioned by their high charges (Fazackerley, 2023; Retraction Watch, 2023), show the profit motive can make them problematic partners for academics, although individuals and divisions within those firms of course can have good intentions.

⁵Gandy's understanding of Creative Commons licensing as applied to OA books naturalises the commercial interests of academic presses, rather than the technological subversions that the radical OA publishers mentioned above can bring. Here, it is useful to think with heterodox intellectual property rights scholars such as Roberto Caso, who has considered the impact that publishing technologies have on the proprietorship of ideas. 'In terms of the priority of the discovery and authorship of the text', Caso argues, 'the purpose of academic copyright is the defence of freedom of thought and, at the same time, the attribution of responsibility for violations of scientific integrity such as in cases of plagiarism. From the point of view of economic rights, the aim is to guarantee the widest dissemination of scientific publications, which since the era of movable type printing translates into the need for scientific authors to find agreements with commercial publishers' (Caso, 2020, p. 133). But contrary to Gandy's article, today the existence of publisher monopolies means economic rights are used to centralise power and control over information and data (Pooley, 2022). Some legacy and commercial publishers still retain copyright (Dodds, 2018). In this respect, the technological subversion inaugurated by the radical OA movement is two-pronged: it reframes scholarship as a public good and the building and maintenance of the systems, processes and relations of production that make scholarship possible as a crucial element of academic citizenship. In other words, the movement advocates for OA as an instrument to make science more open (Chan, 2020).

⁶As an example, *The Routledge handbook of methodologies in human geography* is currently £190, with a similar reduction of the E-Book price down to £38.69. <https://www.routledge.co.uk/The-Routledge-Handbook-of-Methodologies-in-Human-Geography/Rosenberg-Lovell-Coen/p/book/9780367482527> [Accessed 15th December 2023].

⁷See <https://mayflybooks.org/about/>.

⁸See the OBP report at <https://blogs.openbookpublishers.com/open-book-publishers-annual-report-2022/> [Accessed 15th December 2023].

⁹See the official announcement published on 8 May 2023. <https://mitpress.mit.edu/the-mit-press-receives-10-million-endowment-gift-for-open-access-to-knowledge/> [Accessed 15th December 2023].

¹⁰See the DORA declaration at <https://sfedora.org/read/>.

¹¹Data by units of assessment (UOAs) are publicly available online at <https://results2021.ref.ac.uk/filters/unit-of-assessment> [Accessed 15th December 2023].

¹²Data on the OA status of REF2021 submission is available online at: <https://results2021.ref.ac.uk/outputss> [Accessed 15th December 2023].

¹³ Point 207 of the Index of revisions to the 'Panel criteria and working methods' for the REF2021 clearly states: 'No sub-panel will use journal impact factors or any hierarchy of journals in their assessment of outputs. No output will be privileged or disadvantaged on the basis of the publisher, where it is published or the medium of its publication' (REF, 2019, p. 40).

¹⁴ <https://brill.com/page/oacharges> [Accessed 15th December 2023].

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