



THE ROLE OF BOOK REVIEWS IN THE ACADEMIC BOOK ECOSYSTEM

With a focus on reviews of open access books in
well known book review outlets

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Katie Phillips

Supervised by Dr Ross Mounce

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1 REPORT INTRODUCTION

This report is the result of a 6-week internship project to research the role of academic book reviews, with a focus on reviews of open access monographs in major mainstream intellectual review publications. The project was inspired by the suggestion in Peter Baldwin's 2018 article, 'Why Are Universities Open Access Laggards?', that some of the major intellectual book reviewing publications (London Review of Books, New York Review of Books, LA Review of Books etc.) might not have yet reviewed an open access book.¹

I have investigated whether this is the case, and whether it is relevant or important for open access monographs to be reviewed in this type of publication. I have also surveyed the wider ecosystem of academic book reviews to better contextualise this issue. To do this, I have reviewed existing academic research on book reviews; conducted informal interviews with librarians, academics and publishers; and analysed data on all book reviews published in the London Review of Books (LRB) and LA Review of Books (LARB) between 2010 and 2020.

Data from the LRB and LARB, along with information given by MIT Press, show that open access books have been reviewed in these outlets. The earliest full review of a book with a free online version that I found in the LRB was published in 2000,² with a short review of a book with a free online version appearing in the *New York Times Magazine* as early as 1995.³ However, only a small number of open access books have been reviewed in the two review outlets examined, the LRB and the LARB. The most significant reasons for this seem to be:

- The small number of open access books being published.
- Smaller or newer presses may be disadvantaged due to lack of an established reputation or relationship with review editors, or they may have less well-developed strategies for engaging with them, but they are not disadvantaged because they publish open access books.
- The readership of mainstream intellectual review publications is not the primary target audience of peer-reviewed scholarly monographs, so publishers of these books do not tend to seek a review in these outlets.

¹ Baldwin, P. (2018) Why are universities open access laggards? *Bulletin of the GHI* 63, p.67-80.

² Rotman, B. (2000). Pretty Good Privacy. *London Review of Books* 22:11, 1st June. (<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v22/n11/brian-rotman/pretty-good-privacy> accessed 24/08/20).

³ Iovine, J. V. (1995) 'The future of the well made'. *New York Times Magazine* 15th October, Section 6, p.8 (<https://www.nytimes.com/1995/10/15/magazine/the-future-of-the-well-made.html?searchResultPosition=5>, accessed 24/08/20).

This last point is especially important. From my research and interviews, researchers prefer to read reviews of academic books in academic journals because they find this type of review more useful. So, if a scholarly monograph is trying to reach an audience of researchers, a review in an academic journal is much more important. Even if the target audience is outside academia, the majority of the population does not read mainstream intellectual review publications, and it should not be assumed that the target audience of the book will find a review in these publications to be relevant or prestigious.

2 DEFINITIONS

Academic monographs are defined here as peer-reviewed book-length works on a single subject based on rigorous academic research. These books tend to have low sales (around 200 copies sold) and a high price (the average cost of a scholarly history book in 2010 was \$82.65).⁴ They rarely make a large financial surplus, which makes it easier to justify the perceived risk to financial surplus that could come with making a book open access.⁵ Non-fiction trade books are not usually peer-reviewed, but the editors will be more involved in shaping the writing style and the way the content is communicated compared to academic books. They are usually aimed at a wider audience beyond academia and their business model is based on higher sales (>20,000 copies) at a lower price, which relies on a more targeted marketing and publicity strategy.⁶

For the purposes of this report, the term 'major intellectual review publications' is used to refer to the category of publications including: London Review of Books (LRB), New York Review of Books (NYRB), Times Literary Supplement (TLS), and the New York Times (NYT),⁷ with the addition here of the LA Review of Books (LARB). This group of publications all review a combination of non-fiction and literary fiction, and attempt to appeal to an educated, but not specialist, audience.

⁴ Barclay, D. (2016). "The End of the Printed Scholarly Monograph: Collapsing Markets and New Models" Donald Barclay (2016)

<https://ejournals.bc.edu/index.php/ihe/article/view/9233/8289>

⁵ Suber, P. (2012) *Open Access*. MIT Press, p.17.

⁶ Fungaroli Sargent, C. (2010) Persistent publishing myths among scholarly authors with big-bookstore dreams. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* 38:6, p.26.

⁷ Baldwin, P. (2018) Why are universities open access laggards? *Bulletin of the GHI* 63, p.79.

3 PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED RESEARCH

Previous research and discussion on academic book reviewing provides information on the history of book reviewing,⁸ analysis of the craft of book reviewing,⁹ analysis of the language of book reviewing,¹⁰ guides on how to review books well,¹¹ studies of reviewing in certain disciplines,¹² the purpose of book reviewing,¹³ and the opinions of scholars on this part of their work.¹⁴ There has been limited research or publications related to reviews of academic books outside of academic review publications.

However, one article based on professional experience lays out why book reviews in academic journals are more important for academic books than reviews in newspapers. Levi Stahl, a marketing professional at the University of Chicago Press, argues that book reviews in academic journals have functions specific to academia: providing a platform for public scholarly assessment of a book, highlighting new contributions to debates, and helping to build the reputation of the author among their peers.¹⁵ The main purpose of these book reviews, unlike many reviews in the mainstream press, goes beyond simply introducing the book to new audiences (ie, promotion). This suggests that there might be a low number of reviews of open access books because publishers choose not to try to get reviewed in the mainstream press if their attention is better directed towards academic journals.

There has not been any research published on whether review editors are 'biased' against born open access books, but there has been previous research on racism and gender bias in book reviewing. One 2010 report by FAIR that analysed ethnicity, gender and ideology

⁸ Blair, A. (2015). 'Scholarly Critique in Early Modern Europe'. *H-France Salon* 7:20:2.

⁹ Eg. Wulf, K. (2017) 'The Art and Craft of Reviewing'. *The Scholarly Kitchen*, 9th January. <https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2017/01/09/the-art-and-craft-of-review/> accessed 20/08/20.

¹⁰ Eg. Morena, A. I. and Suarez, L. 2008. A study of critical attitude across English and Spanish academic book reviews. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* 7:1 15-26.

¹¹ Lee, A. D., Green, B. N., Johnson, C. D. and Nyquist, J. (2010) 'How to write a scholarly book review for publication in a peer-reviewed journal: A review of the literature.' *Journal of Chiropractic Education* 24:1, 57-69.

¹² Hubbard, D. E. (2011) 'Chemistry book reviews: their value, sources and number'. *Collection Building* 30:4, pp.172-178.

¹³ Eg. Scott Christofferson, M. (2015). 'Scholarly Critique in the Twenty-First Century'. *H-France Salon* 7:20:4.

¹⁴ Eg. Nesci, C. (2015). 'A personal perspective on book reviewing'. *H-France Salon* 7:20:5.

¹⁵ Stahl, L (2018) So what if it's not in the New York Times: Why one university press seeks book reviews in scholarly journals. *Journal of Scholarly Publishing* 50:1, pp.8-11. P.10.

bias in book reviews in the New York Times Book Reviews section found no evident biases in reviews of political books with different ideologies, but there was a very significant dominance of white men among both the reviewers and authors.¹⁶ The pattern appears to follow the dominance of white men in other sections of the paper however,¹⁷ so is not specific to the book reviewing section. It is useful to know that some degree of bias may be acting against certain books, regardless of whether the book is available open access, but there is no evidence from previously published studies to indicate that open access books would be discriminated against because of their open access status.

More broadly, research on the purpose of academic book reviewing suggests that there are multiple functions to an academic review. East's summary of previous research proposes the following functions: informing the scholarly community about a new book; evaluating the strengths of the book and demonstrating how it relates to other scholarship; recommending that others do or do not read the book; providing a forum for discussing the book; and demonstrating publicly that scholars are critically analysing each other's work.¹⁸ This last function relates to the pre-publication process of peer-review, and is peculiar to scholarly book reviews, as opposed to reviews of non-academic books that are not peer-reviewed. These functions also demonstrate Stahl's point about how reviews of academic books encourage books to be used, whereas reviews of trade books encourage books to be bought.¹⁹

4 DATA FROM THE LRB AND LARB

I analysed data sourced from two major intellectual review publications, the London Review of Books (LRB) and the LA Review of Books (LARB). For a full methodology and details of what was examined, please see *Appendix 1*. MIT Press, a partially open access press and a grantee of Arcadia, also gave Arcadia data on reviews of 25 of its books.

¹⁶ Rendall, S. (2010) 'Who gets to review and be reviewed?' FAIR Extra! Newsletter, 1st August. (<https://fair.org/uncategorized/nyt-gender-bias-in-book-reviews-and-beyond/> , accessed 24/08/20).

¹⁷ Rendall, S. (2010) 'NYT gender bias – in book reviews and beyond'. FAIR Extra! Newsletter 3rd September. (<https://fair.org/uncategorized/nyt-gender-bias-in-book-reviews-and-beyond/> , accessed 24/08/20)

¹⁸ East, J. W. (2011). 'The scholarly book review in the humanities: An academic Cinderella?' *Journal of Scholarly Publishing* 43:1, pp.52-67. 58.

¹⁹ Stahl, L (2018) So What is it's not in the New York Times: Why one university press seeks book reviews in scholarly journals. *Journal of Scholarly Publishing* 50:1, 8-11. 11.

The LRB is a subscription-based journal published online and fortnightly in print form, with a print circulation of over 78,000.²⁰ Its writers review multiple books in a single essay-like article. The LRB is known for its politically left/liberal stance.²¹ The LARB, which was founded as an internet-native publication in 2011, is free to access online, with an optional paid subscription for its quarterly journal.²² It is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organisation.²³ The LARB tends to review single books per article.

Key findings of the data were:

- Open access books have been reviewed in both publications, but only rarely.
- Most of the books reviewed in both publications were not published by university presses.
- Both publications reviewed books from a variety of publishers, but books by a small group of publishers were dominant.

4.1 LRB

The data from the LRB shows that only 0.3% of the 2,847 reviews in the LRB were of open access books. Six open access government/NGO reports were reviewed from 2010 to present, but only one born open access book, an edited collection,²⁴ in 2011.²⁵ The only open access monograph LRB reviewed (*Édith Piaf: A Cultural History*)²⁶ was only made open access through the Knowledge Unlatched scheme in 2018/19²⁷, around 3 years after it was reviewed by the LRB in 2015.²⁸ Even if all 8 of these books are considered, less than 0.3% of the 2,847 publications reviewed by the LRB in volumes 32:1-42:14 were open access publications.

However, data from MIT Press does show that the LRB have been reviewing proto-open access publications for at least 20 years. One of MIT Press's books, *Privacy on the*

²⁰ London Review of Books. 'Advertise with the London Review of Books'.

<https://www.lrb.co.uk/pages/standalone/advertise-with-the-london-review-of-books>

²¹ Marshall, C. (2020) 'Something new: The "LRB" turns 40'. *LA Review of Books*, 14th January. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/something-new-lrb-turns-40/> accessed 28/08/20.

²² LA Review of Books. 'LARB Membership'. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/membership/>

²³ LA Review of Books. 'About LARB'. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/about/>

²⁴ Glasman, M., Rutherford, J. and Stears, M (2011). *The Labour Tradition and the Politics of Paradox: The Oxford London Seminars 2010-11*. Soundings.

²⁵ Runciman, D. (2011). 'Socialism in one country'. *London Review of Books* 33:15, 28th July. (<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v33/n15/david-runciman/socialism-in-one-county> , accessed 24/08/20)

²⁶ Loosely, D. (2015). *Édith Piaf: A Cultural History*. Liverpool University Press.

²⁷ <https://www.knowledgeunlatched.org/>

²⁸ Wilson, B. (2016). 'Like Cold Oysters'. *London Review of Books* 38:10, 19th May. (<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v38/n10/bee-wilson/like-cold-oysters> accessed 24/08/20).

Line,²⁹ was reviewed by the LRB in the year 2000.³⁰ The LRB was not the only reviewer of proto-open access books: even the first book published by MIT Press with a freely-available online version,³¹ *City of Bits* by William Mitchell,³² was reviewed in The New York Times Magazine in 1995.³³

The LRB reviews books from a range of publishers, though 20% (590) of the 2,847 books reviewed are ultimately owned by a single multinational conglomerate – Penguin Random House. 42% (1,183) of the books reviewed were published by the top 5 publishers, which included two university presses, Oxford University Press (233 books) and Yale University Press (114 books) (*fig 2*). This compares to books published by University Presses making up 28% (792) of all books reviewed (*fig. 1*). Despite the dominance of the top presses, there is a long tail of publishers with only a few books reviewed: 10% of books (294) are published by publishers with fewer than five books reviewed, and 17% of books (489) are published by publishers with 10 or fewer. Books published by Granta Books made up 1% of books reviewed (36).

4.2 LARB

A total of 4,990 reviews were recorded in the LARB data set. Of these, three were identified as open access books: *Frankenstein: Annotated for Scientists, Engineers and Creators of All Kinds* (2017),³⁴ *Holy Hip Hop in the City of Angels* (2017),³⁵ and *Matches: A Light Book* (2015).³⁶

²⁹ Diffie, W. and Landau, S. (1999) *Privacy on the Line*. MIT Press.

³⁰ Rotman, B. (2000). Pretty Good Privacy. *London Review of Books* 22:11, 1st June. (<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v22/n11/brian-rotman/pretty-good-privacy> accessed 24/08/20.)

³¹ MIT Press (n.d.) *MIT Press open access titles and experiments on the PubPub platform from the Knowledge Futures Group* (<https://mitpressonpubpub.mitpress.mit.edu/#:~:text=The%20MIT%20Press%20has%20been,a%20dynamic%2C%20open%20web%20edition>. Accessed 24/08/20)

³² Mitchell, W. J. (1995) *City of Bits: Space, Place and the Infobahn*. MIT Press.

³³ Iovine, J. V. (1995) 'The future of the well made'. *New York Times Magazine* 15th October, Section 6, p.8 (<https://www.nytimes.com/1995/10/15/magazine/the-future-of-the-well-made.html?searchResultPosition=5>, accessed 24/08/20).

³⁴ Shelley, M; Guston, D. H. and Robert, J. S. (eds) (2017) *Frankenstein: Annotated for Scientists, Engineers, and Creators of All Kinds*. MIT Press.
Perkowitz, S. (2018) 'Frankenstein turns 200 and becomes required reading for scientists'. *LA Review of Books*, 9th July. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/frankenstein-turns-200-and-becomes-required-reading-for-scientists/> accessed 24/08/20.

³⁵ Zanfagna, C. (2017) *Holy Hip Hop in the City of Angels*. MIT Press.
Johnson, F. (2018) 'Rock of ages'. *LA Review of Books*, 17th June. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/rock-of-ages/> accessed 24/08/20.

³⁶ Chrostowska, S. D. (2015) *Matches: A Light Book*. punctum books.

The LARB dataset shows that the LARB reviewed books are published by a greater range of publishers than the LRB, but a smaller proportion of these are from university presses. The LARB reviewed books from 589 publishers, 335 (57%) of which had only had one book reviewed by the LARB. Books reviewed by the top five publishers represented 35% of the reviews in the LARB (1,770 books). Many of these publishers have books reviewed in the LARB under different imprints. The LARB is or has been financially supported by 12 university presses, including MIT Press, Cambridge University Press, University of California Press, Columbia University Press and Stanford University Press.³⁷ However, our data shows that there is no evidence that this has influenced which books were reviewed, especially given that the LARB has reviewed a much lower proportion of university press books than the LRB (*figs 2 and 3*).

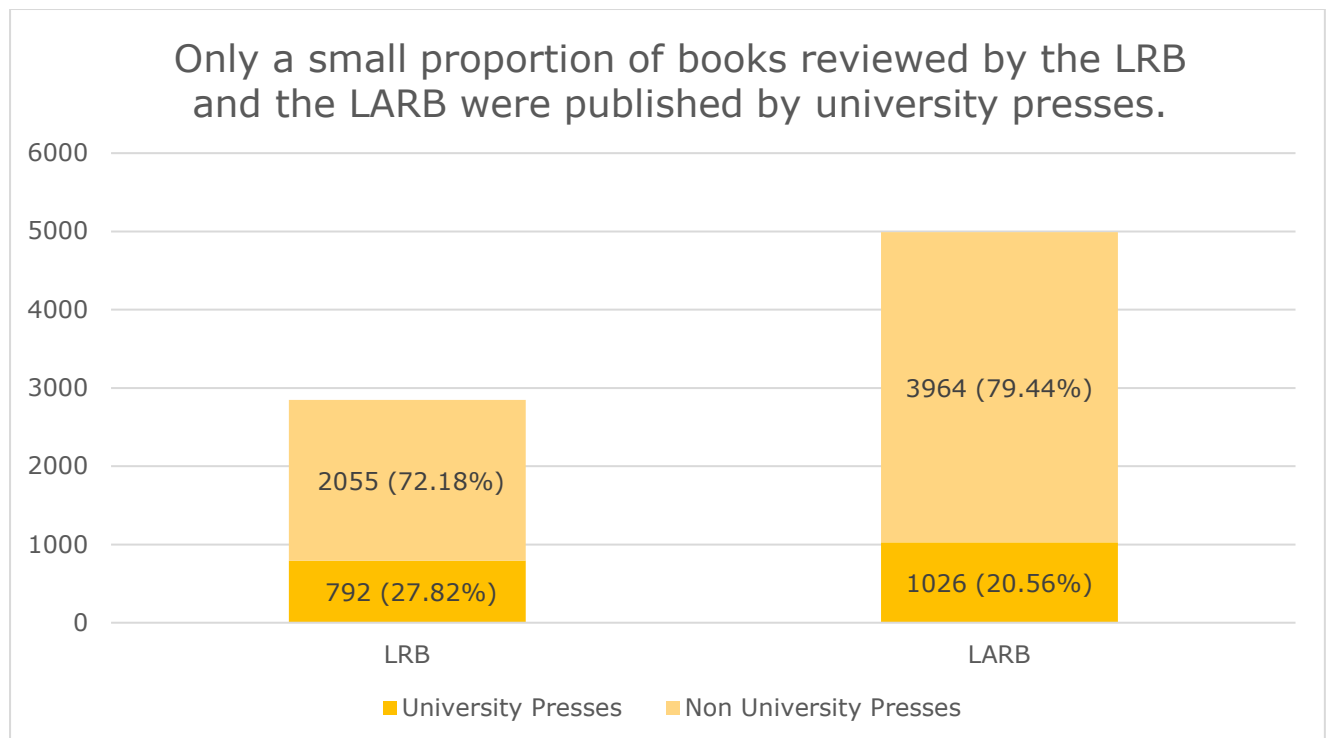


Fig 1. Most books reviewed in both the LRB and LARB were not published by university presses.

Green, D. K. (2016) 'A flare for criticism'. *LA Review of Books*, 16th April.
<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/a-flare-for-criticism/> accessed 24/08/20

³⁷ LA Review of Books. 'Supporters'. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/about/supporters/#> accessed 28/08/20.

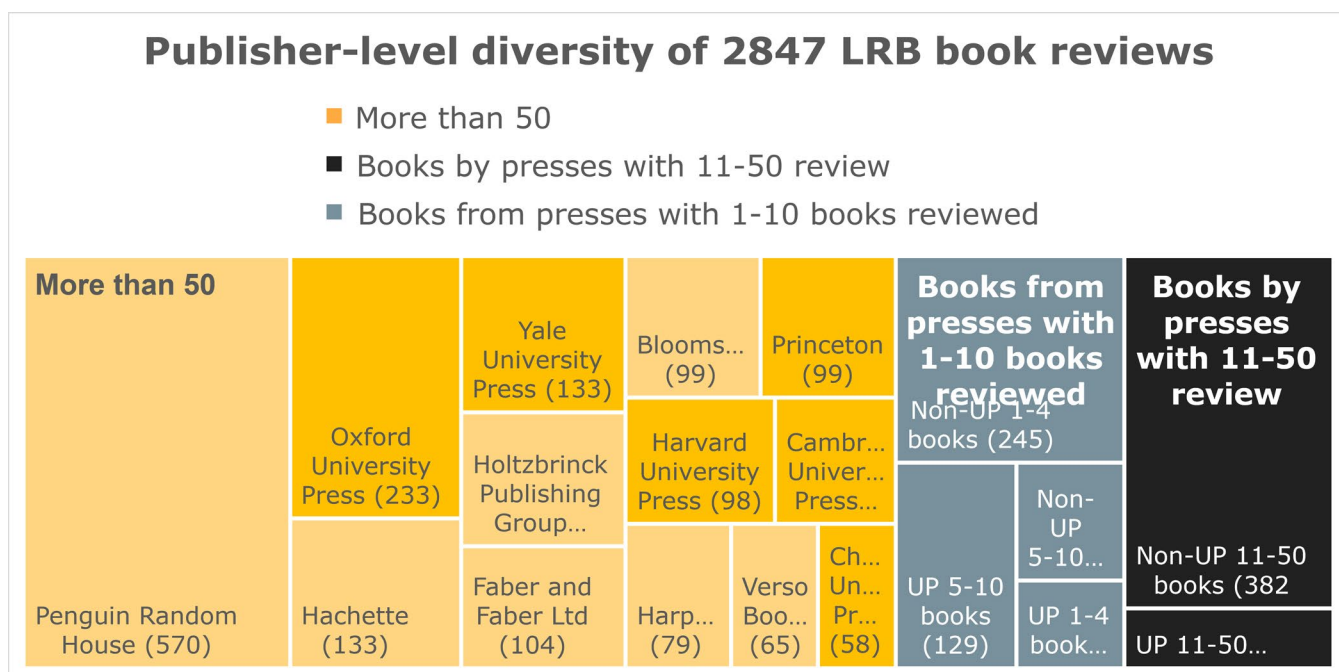


Fig 2. The LRB reviewed a high proportion of books from a small number of publishers. University Presses are highlighted.

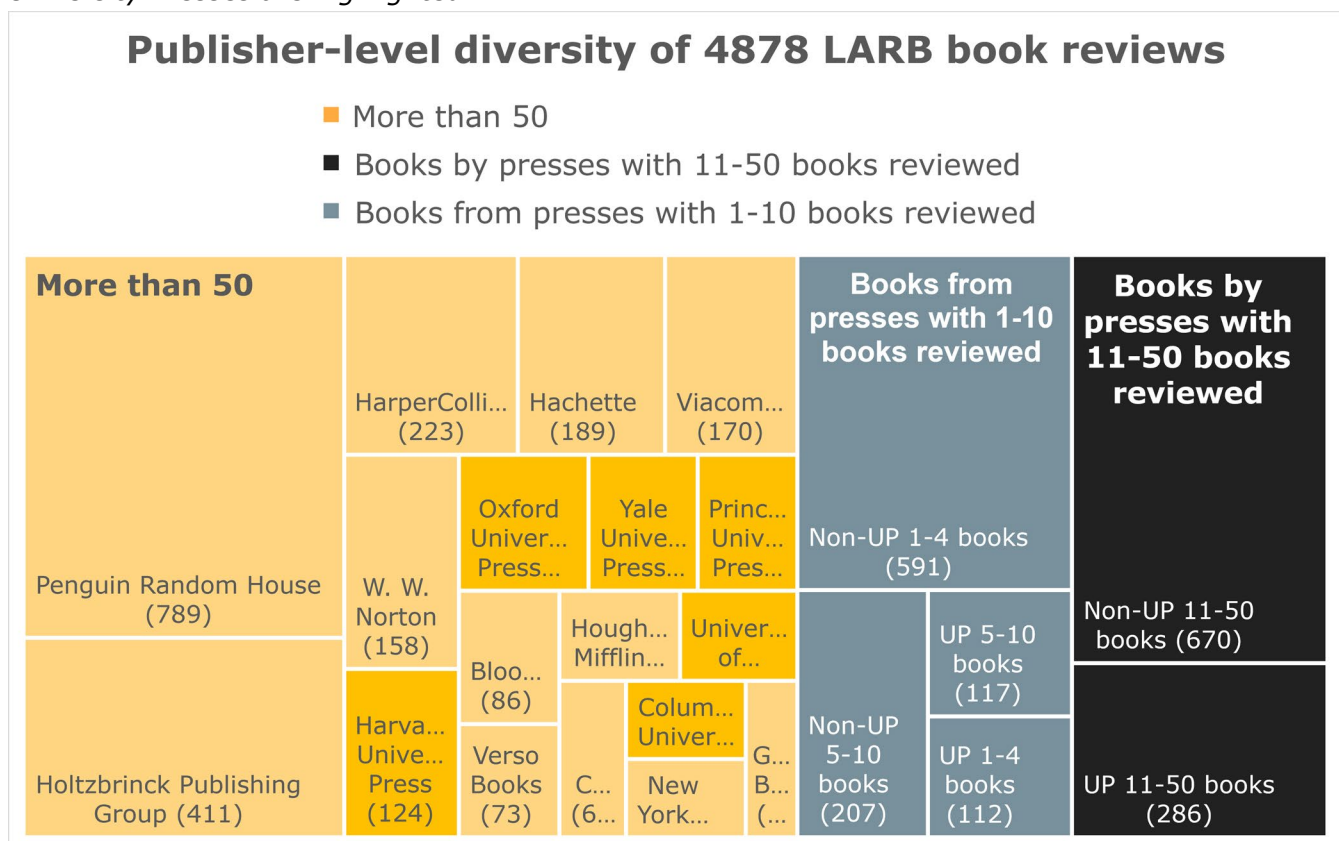


Fig 3. The LARB reviewed a high number of books from a small number of publishers, but also had a wide diversity of publishers with only a few books reviewed.

5 INTERVIEWS

Between late July and late August 2020, I talked to 5 publishers, 3 librarians and 8 researchers about their experiences with book reviews. The short timescale of the project combined with the timing of many peoples' summer holidays has meant that I could not talk to as many people as I would have liked. Nobody I contacted from mainstream review publications replied to me.

To preserve interviewee anonymity, individual interviewees will be referred to by 'Researcher 1', 'Librarian 2' etc. Please see Appendix 2 for a key to interviewees and anonymised background information.

5.1 PUBLISHERS

I spoke to representatives from five publishers: two small, independent open access presses, one open access university press, and two university presses offering both open access and non-open access publishing.

In many cases, open access books may not appear in prestigious mainstream review journals because the readership of those publications is not the intended audience of the book. All the publishers I spoke to cited suitability of the audience as very important when targeting places to market their book. Prestigious mainstream review publications are not the most relevant place for many new books appealing to niche audiences, either because the book's key audience is fellow academics who are more concerned about academic journal reviews, just as Stahl argues,³⁸ or because their key audience lies outside the readership of the mainstream press. Even for para-academic or popular academic books, Publisher 4 said that other formats of media engagement, such as interviews or book excerpts, were far more important for their books than book reviews. Open access books commonly fall into these categories, especially the category of academic books,³⁹ so the absence of open access books in prestigious mainstream review publications may be due to self-selection by the publishers.

Publisher 2, which often publishes non-fiction and fiction books with niche audiences or deep involvement in specific communities, told me that some of the authors published by the press were not interested in being reviewed in the LRB or similar review publications because of their audience. Instead, they said that, for some books, it was much more important for the author to appear on certain podcasts, radio shows or blogs where the intended audience was to be found. To them, the LRB may be 'prestigious', but it is therefore irrelevant, and not worth pursuing as an avenue for advertisement or review.

³⁸ Stahl, L. (2018) 'So what if it's not in the New York Times?'. *Journal of Scholarly Publishing* 50:1, pp8-11.

³⁹ Suber, P. (2012) *Open Access*. MIT Press, p.17.

One book published by this press was reviewed in the LA Review of Books, but this was due to the author's personal connections, and Publisher 2 said that this was not typical of the books they published. Information on the circulation demographics of the LRB, for example, shows that the majority of the readers had a degree (91%), and are generally wealthy, with 70% having jobs classified as 'senior roles'.⁴⁰ If a book does not appeal to an educated and wealthy demographic, it may not find the LRB a good place for a review.

The publishers I spoke to did identify several ways that open access books might be at a disadvantage when soliciting reviews from prestigious mainstream review publications: dislike of e-books by review editors using more conventional workflows, lack of perceived prestige of open access publishers, and the need to build up relationships with review editors. The first is worth considering but will be discussed later. The latter two may affect smaller or newer presses regardless of whether or not they publish open access.

Reputation and personal connections may influence which books are reviewed, but it is difficult to tell without comparable data. Publisher 5 noted that their press's long-standing reputation for publishing very high-quality work to a high scholarly standard means that review editors are much more likely to take them seriously when they initiate contact. This contrasts with the experience of Publisher 1, who said that they rarely hear back from review editors they contact and were often 'ghosted'. Publisher 5 suggested that personal connections to review editors and others within the reviewing publications could be useful for presses without that automatic prestige, especially if they knew the special interests of the author. It is difficult to get data on this, but it does suggest that the book reviewing market is not a level playing field. However, Publisher 1 said that they had more difficulty in getting reviews when they were a new press because they had not yet worked out how to effectively market their books. Without more evidence, it is difficult to tell whether smaller or newer presses may be at a disadvantage

5.2 LIBRARIANS

If a publisher is using book reviews to promote their books, and the key group purchasing their books is libraries, then their reviews need to be in places where academics will read them, not necessarily librarians. Publisher 5 said that many of the academic books they publish in the humanities would expect to sell 200-300 copies, and that around 90% of these will be bought by libraries. Book reviews do not seem to be a primary way for librarians to acquire books, according to the librarians I spoke to. They do, however, seem to be a significant way that academics find books to then recommend for librarians to

⁴⁰ The London Review of Books. 'Advertise with the London Review of Books'. <https://www.lrb.co.uk/pages/standalone/advertise-with-the-london-review-of-books> accessed 25/08/2020.

purchase, or set books for their courses that will then need to be purchased by the library. None of the librarians I spoke to used mainstream intellectual book review publications to find books. Librarian 1 said their primary acquisition source was an acquisition scheme direct from publishers with occasional recommendations from academics, while Librarian 2 and Librarian 3 said they used a mix of sources including academic recommendations and publisher catalogues. Librarian 3 occasionally used book reviews to find books when there was spare money in their budget, but often found them “pesky” as they thought some reviews were too promotional to be helpful. None of the librarians used mainstream intellectual review publications to source books for their libraries; if they ever used book reviews, these came from academic journals.

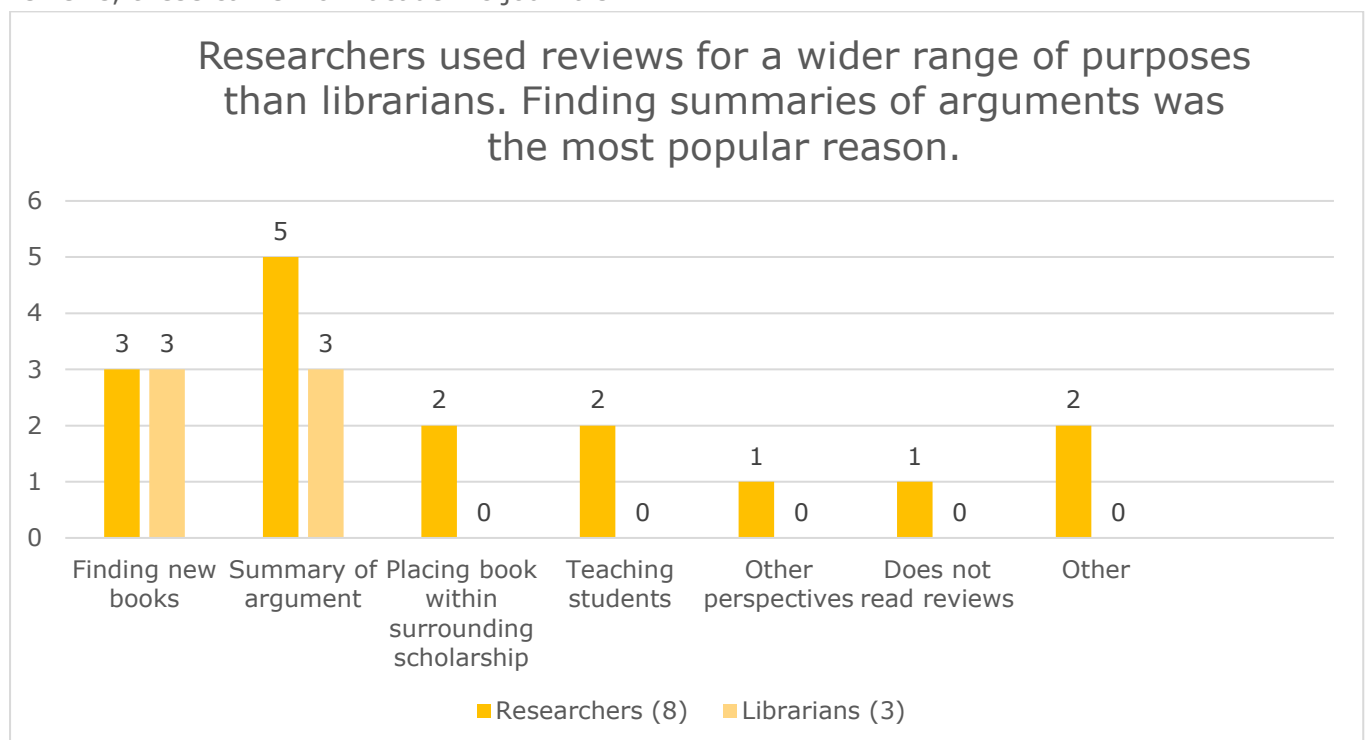


Fig 4. Academics gave a range of reasons for reading book reviews.

5.3 ACADEMICS

All the academics I spoke to except Researcher 6 read reviews, and all but one (Researcher 6) found them useful. They gave a variety of reasons for reading book reviews (*fig. 4*) that did not quite align with East’s list of the functions of an academic book review.⁴¹ Following East’s list, three researchers listed ‘finding new books’ as a reason to read book reviews and two researchers listed contextualising the book within the surrounding scholarship. They also used book reviews for several other purposes,

⁴¹ East, J. W. (2011). ‘The scholarly book review in the humanities: An academic Cinderella?’ *Journal of Scholarly Publishing* 43:1, pp.52-67. 58.

including teaching undergraduates that scholars can disagree and getting summaries of a researcher's work so that they can write a more accurate reference.

However, despite almost all the researchers saying that they found reviews helpful, they identified several problems with academic book reviewing. These included the undervaluation of book reviewing by assessment systems, the lag between book publication and review publication, the poor quality of reviews by other scholars, especially where the reviewer only summarises and doesn't critique, and an unequal power dynamic between review author and book author meaning that the reviewer cannot always be honest. None of these problems seem to have a simple solution.

All the researchers said that they wrote book reviews, although two of the more senior researchers said that they wrote far fewer the more senior they got. The most common reasons the researchers gave for writing book reviews were: being a good academic citizen; getting a free copy of a book; and because they were asked to. Book reviews are not valued by systems such as the Research Excellence Framework exercise in the UK, or many tenure systems in the US because they are not considered original research, so there is little external incentive. Many of the academics I spoke to, especially Researcher 2, firmly believed that book reviewing should get more credit.

Journals created a long lag between a book's release and the publication of the printed review. However, there is still a lag in online journals while the book is reviewed after publication, and Researcher 3 said that they missed the way that a print journal could lay out all new reviews in one single release, whereas it is harder to get the same overview with online reviews that are published as and when. Comments sections on online platforms could have been a place to start this dialogue but are rarely used. Publisher 1 set up a comments section on the pages for each book on their website, but people did not leave comments. The comments sections are not often used on online blogs either, nor even online platforms like H-Net with heavier online traffic. Publisher 2 points out that people will only comment if they feel they have an audience for their views, and there simply isn't enough traffic to sustain a viable comments section on these sorts of websites, even H-Net. Twitter provides a useful platform for discussion for some researchers but not others: Researchers 2 and 4 said they found Twitter helpful for finding new books to read but Researcher 3 and Researcher 5 do not use Twitter. Researcher 3 said that their favourite form for discussing other academics' books was reading groups, as they could hear a variety of perspectives on the same book and exchange ideas. However, Researcher 3 still valued the depth of a written book review that could be added to the academic corpus and viewed by others.

Paywalls on reviews of academic book create frustration among academics, though it is not clear how significant an effect this has on academics' research. Unlike with journal articles, book reviews are not original research, and a researcher could mitigate the problems caused by finding an alternative review of that book elsewhere – if one exists. Moreover, even though they can be useful, reading book reviews is not always a necessity if a book is not yet available – most academics said they would still read an interesting-

looking book even if they were not able to access a review. However, in many cases, these paywalled reviews can be accessed via institutional subscriptions - but that also means that any difficulties that paywalling causes will disproportionately affect researchers at smaller or less wealthy universities, and independent researchers who are not affiliated to an institution with journal subscriptions. Researcher 1 was particularly frustrated at the principle of charging more for access to a book review than the cost of a book.⁴² Researcher 1 thought that this was unfair because the book review was not original research, and the publisher of the book was also gaining from the free advertising of having a book review published – surely it would be in the book publisher’s interest to make sure this ‘advert’ was available to as many readers as possible.

Academic book reviewing currently seems to maintain an awkward position in scholarship – the writer of an academic book review is usually not given any credit by their institution or other scholars for their work, but scholars do seem to find them useful despite longstanding complaints about quality. Key functions of the academic book review are: highlighting recently published books, summarising the argument of a book, and situating the book in the scholarship (including critiquing gaps). Book reviews also give academics proof that other scholars are engaging with their research, which is sometimes necessary for promotion or grant application processes.

6 DISCUSSION

6.1 LOW NUMBERS OF OA BOOKS

The small number of books published open access is certainly a key reason why there are so few reviews of open access books in mainstream intellectual review publications. The arguments for publishing open access are strongest for academic books,⁴³ and most open access books are academic books or textbooks, not trade books. However, even within the pool of academic books, only a small proportion were published open access in the last decade. It has not been possible to calculate an exact percentage of how many of the books published annually are open access, due to incomplete data on the number of open

⁴² An example of this is available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24474127>, where a review of *Trade and Institutions in the Medieval Mediterranean: The Geniza Merchants and their Business World* by Jessica L. Goldberg (2016) costs \$51.00 (£38.78) to download from JStor, but a print copy of the book itself is available for £26.99 from the publisher’s website (<https://www.cambridge.org/gb/academic/subjects/history/economic-history/trade-and-institutions-medieval-mediterranean-geniza-merchants-and-their-business-world?format=PB>)

⁴³ Suber, P. (2012) *Open Access*. MIT Press, p.17.

access books and varying definitions of what is classified as an open access book. However, as an example, Cambridge University Press (CUP) published 22,053 books between 2010 and present, of which 80 (0.4%) are currently available open access on their website (*fig. 5*).⁴⁴ They started publishing born open access in 2013, so this percentage is not representative of more recent years: in 2019, they published 1769 books, of which 19 (1%) are available open access. During the period 2010-2020 that was covered by the data scraped from the LRB website, LRB reviewed 79 books by CUP, none of which appear to be available open access. However, this represents only 0.4% of the total number of books published by CUP (*fig. 4*). This means that, were all CUP books marketed equally by CUP and treated equally by LRB, there would only be a 0.16% chance that an open access book would be one of those CUP books selected by the LRB to be reviewed. Even though that chance does increase between 2010 and present, it is still <0.5%. In other words, given the number of books CUP publishes and the number of CUP books reviewed by the LRB, it is reasonable to expect that there will not be an open access CUP book reviewed by LRB in the period being examined.

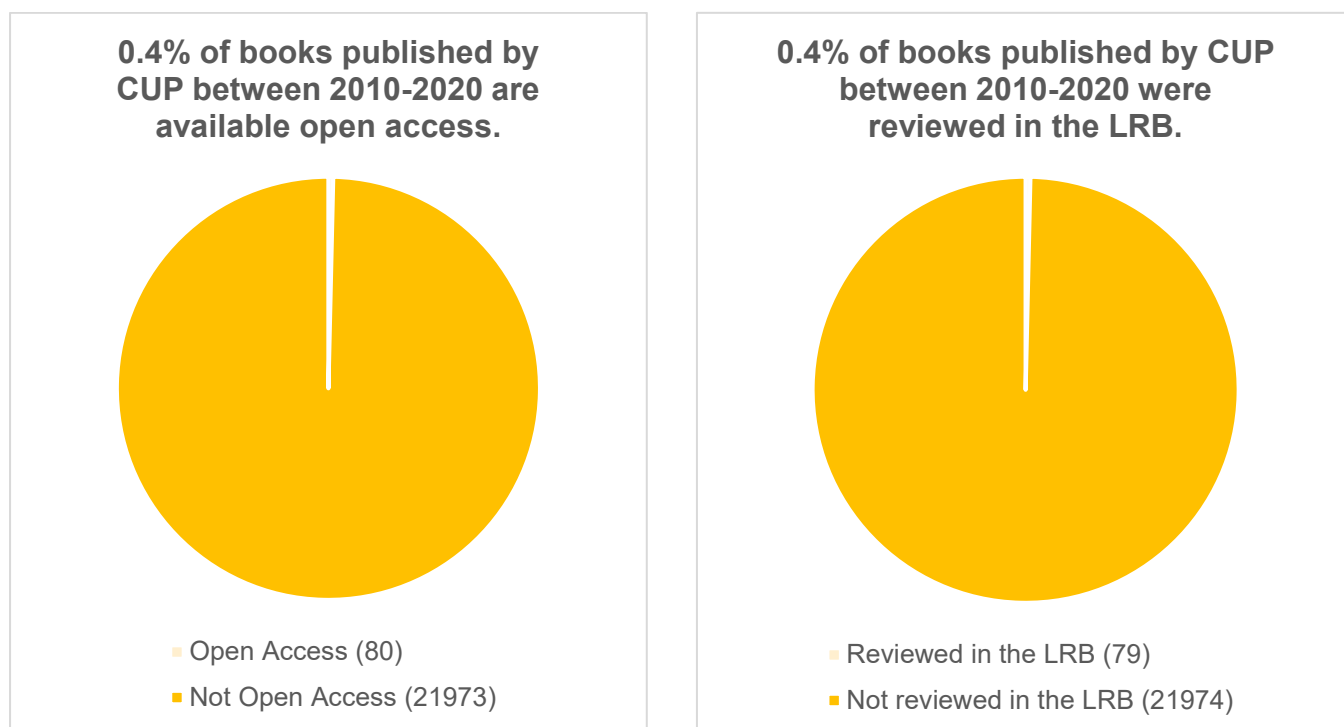


Figure 5. There is a statistically negligible chance that any of the books published by CUP in this period and reviewed by the LRB would have been open access.

6.2 SUITABILITY OF PUBLICATION

Both the publishers and the researchers I spoke to agreed that book reviews in academic journals were more important for academic books than prestigious mainstream review publications. Publisher 5 was very specific that the majority of books they published would

⁴⁴ www.cambridge.org

not be suitable for review in prestigious mainstream review publications, such as the London Review of Books or the New York Review of Books, because they only appeal to a very small section of people, who are much more likely to read reviews of the book in academic journals. Most of the researchers and librarians I spoke to did not mind where a review was published among the different academic journals, but the majority were not interested in reviews in mainstream media when looking for books for their research. This suggests that if an author is publishing open access largely to enable a wider range of their peers to access their research, then reviews in scholarly journals are probably more important for credibility and accessibility. Researcher 7 said they published their book with an open access version so that researchers in the country whose history they were researching were also able to access the book. That audience are more likely to see reviews in academic journals than in another country's mainstream media.

6.3 ACKNOWLEDGING OPEN ACCESS

Poor communication between publisher, review editor and reviewer appears to be a significant reason that reviews frequently do not say when a book is available open access. Several possible reasons for this were given by the people I talked to, including accidental omission by the review author, accidental omission by the review editor, and, less frequently, deliberate omission by the book publisher requesting the review. Another issue is links to open access versions becoming defunct.

Deliberate omission by the publisher when marketing their books to review publications was only mentioned by one participant, so seems to be a less significant problem. Publisher 4 said that they purposefully do not tell review editors of mainstream publications that a book is available open access, because they are worried that there may still be the stigma around open access outside the academic world, or that people will not understand. They were more concerned about the reader's reaction, not the review editor's. On the other hand, Publisher 3 actively promotes their publications to review editors as born open access. They have said there has generally been a positive response to this, and some reviews have apparently included direct praise of the open access availability.

A potentially more common problem is gaps in communication between publisher, review editor and reviewer, that lead to accidental omission open access status. Publisher 1 said that this was a general problem when trying to get their books reviewed, as they were not in control of what information was passed on from the review editor to the reviewer when the editors were commissioning reviews. Publisher 3 said that they always request that each of their books that is reviewed references the fact that it is available open access, but stressed that this frequently requires multiple reminders to the review editors, both pre-and post-publication of the review. According to Publisher 3, review editors rarely deliberately omit open access information in a review, and editors were almost universally willing to correct the omission once reminded. Publisher 3 suggested that accidental omissions may be happening because review publishers are yet to set up a systematic

format for including open access details, as born open access monographs are still uncommon.

One pairing of examples shows how an inconsistent editorial approach that relies on reviewers' initiative leads to an inconsistent reference to open access, even within a single publication. Within one history journal, *Twentieth Century British History*, I found only one book review that gave open access details⁴⁵, but also found a review of a book I knew to be born open access that did not mention its open access availability⁴⁶. I asked the authors of both reviews if they knew why they had or had not included this information. The author of the review with details said that they had deliberately included those details in their submission to the editor, as they knew the author personally and had discussed their concerns about the marketing and visibility of open access books. The author of the review that did not include open access information was not sure why this information was not included, as they were aware and supportive of the open access status of the book they reviewed, which is part of a prominent born open access series. After my email, they then said they wanted to ask the publisher to amend their review. In this case, details of open access status were acceptable within a journal's editorial guidelines, but were only included on the author's initiative. With so few examples of open access books in mainstream review publications, it is hard to tell if this is the case there too.

However, even where a link to an open access version is included, if this link is not a DOI link it can later become defunct. For example, when a born open access edited collection⁴⁷ was reviewed in the LRB,⁴⁸ instead of recording a publisher or price (as is customary in the LRB), they printed a URL (www.soundings.org.uk) that redirects to another publishers' website (www.lwbooks.co.uk/soundings), where the book does not show up through search functions or manual searching (as of multiple attempts during August 2020). It is, however, possible to find a full open access copy of the book through the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine,⁴⁹ which has effectively preserved an entire book that would otherwise have been lost. However, this issue could have been resolved by simply providing a DOI link on digital reviews, that will maintain a direct link to the open access version even if website links change.

⁴⁵ Chaney, S. (2016). Review of 'A History of Self-Harm in Britain: A Genealogy of Cutting and Overdosing'. Chris Millard. *Twentieth Century British History* 27:3, 500-502. <https://doi.org/10.1093/tcbh/hww009>

⁴⁶ Shoop-Worrall, C. (2020). Review of 'The Family Firm: Monarchy, Mass Media and the British Public, 1932-53'. Edward Owens. *Twentieth Century British History*, 27th June. <https://doi.org/10.1093/tcbh/hwaa020>

⁴⁷ Glasman, M., Rutherford, J. and Stears, M (2011). The Labour Tradition and the Politics of Paradox: The Oxford London Seminars 2010-11. Soundings.

⁴⁸ Runciman, D. (2011). 'Socialism in one country'. *London Review of Books* 33:15, 28th July. (<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v33/n15/david-runciman/socialism-in-one-county> , accessed 24/08/20)

⁴⁹ <https://archive.org/web/>

6.4 E-BOOKS AND REVIEWING

Both publishers and academics raised e-books as an issue for book reviewing, but from the reviewer's point of view it can be easily resolved. While all of the academics I spoke to said they were willing to review (or in two cases, already had reviewed) open access books, all but two said that they did not want to review e-books because of the practical difficulties of reviewing a large piece of work from a screen. However, given that all the publishers I spoke to also print hard copy versions of their open access books and were willing to send print copies to reviewers if requested, this does not logically seem like it would be a problem. Indeed, two publishers said that reviewers had been more frequently requesting digital copies of books since the restrictions due to the covid-19 pandemic began in March 2020.

Review editors might miss or refuse to consider books sent to them digitally, which might disadvantage less wealthy presses, but since pandemic lockdown restrictions began in early 2020, more well-established presses have been doing this too. The conventional way for a reviews editor to manage the books they are sent for review is via their post box and the stack of physical books on their desks. This can be a problem for open access presses who cannot afford to send books out to all review editors without a request, and can also especially disadvantage publishers in countries far away from the review editor's base, an issue that has previously been flagged by editors of academic journals.⁵⁰ It is possible that by not submitting their book via this method, a review editor might miss a publisher's book. However, Publisher 5 suggested that many publishers, including well-established conventional publishers, were having to cut down on the number of physical copies they send out for financial reasons, especially since their freight costs had increased 10-fold since the beginning of the covid-19 crisis. Data was not available to show whether this disproportionately affects smaller publishers, but it doesn't seem to exclusively be an open access problem, if it is a problem at all.

6.5 BOOK REVIEWS IN OTHER LANGUAGES

The discussions of book reviews in this report are mainly confined to scholarship in English due to the language limitations of the author. However, book reviewing exists in most scholarly communities worldwide, and many scholars are active in more than one language. It should not be assumed though that the research in this report can necessarily apply beyond Anglo-American book reviewing: linguistic studies and anecdotal research suggest that different scholarly communities do differ in their approaches to post-

⁵⁰ Roberts, P., Schneider, R. and Wolfe, M./H-France (2015) *H-France Salon: The Scholarly Critique*. Available at: <https://youtu.be/S-ArMc5Qc54> (Accessed: 26 August 2020).

publication reviewing,⁵¹ and the extent of this has not been measured in this report. Researcher 7, whose book was reviewed in both English and German, said that he was particularly pleased that his book had been reviewed in multiple languages, as it meant that scholars who could not read his full book in English could at least access a summary of his research.

7 CONCLUSION

Data from the LRB, LARB and MIT Press have shown that open access books have been reviewed in mainstream intellectual review publications, but not very frequently. The comparatively low number of open access books being published is likely to be a very significant factor in this. Discussions with publishers, librarians and academics showed that all groups are more likely to seek out reviews of academic books in academic journals rather than mainstream media, so it is likely that publishers are also self-selecting away from mainstream intellectual review publications when trying to get their books reviewed.

8 RECOMMENDATIONS

The issue that Arcadia is best placed to help with is the inconsistent acknowledgement of open access status in book reviews. This could either be in the form of directly encouraging the journals to make including this information (and a DOI link) a standard part of their editing process, or perhaps funding solutions to automatically flag to internet users when a book is open access, similar to the function of the Open Access Button extension or Unpaywall extension for journals. Researcher 6 did not think that it was important to do this because it is possible to search online to find open access versions, but these are not always easy to find. Researcher 6 also pointed out that many open access books rely on sales of print copies to financially support the open access version. While this is a valid point, providing the option of a link on the review allows fair access to open access versions for all readers, regardless of whether they are savvy enough to search for an open access copy (and given how few open access books there currently are, this would not be many readers' first thought). If further research is produced that the model of open access publishing would be destabilised by further promoting free online versions, then of course Arcadia may have to reconsider its plans, but otherwise Arcadia should encourage better acknowledgement of open access in book reviews.

⁵¹ Bondi, M. (2009) Historians at work: reporting frameworks in English and Italian book review articles. In Hyland, K. and Diani, G. (eds). *Academic Evaluation: Review Genres in University Settings*. Palgrave MacMillan. 179-196.

Morena, A. I. and Suarez, L. 2008. A study of critical attitude across English and Spanish academic book reviews. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* 7:1 15-26.

A related problem is that there is currently no complete list of books available open access because not all publishers submit records to databases like the Directory of Open Access Books (DOAB). Encouraging publishers to submit up-to-date records to databases including the DOAB or platforms such as OAPEN would make open access books easier to find

Finally, given that there have not yet been many open access monographs published, I would recommend repeating the data collection part of this research in the future. Currently there is no evidence of any bias on the part of review editors or review authors in the allocation of reviews in mainstream intellectual review publications, but there are so few open access books published that it would be hard to detect any patterns if there were any differences. A similar study of reviews in academic journals would also demonstrate whether there are any different patterns in the books chosen for mainstream review and scholarly review, beyond the distinction of trade book and academic book.

There are two further areas where funding could be directed in an ideal world, but which are not realistically within Arcadia's scale to maintain: removing paywalls from book reviews and better funding academia.

It would be difficult to justify the funding that would be needed to publish all book reviews open access, especially when they are not valued by funding bodies or institutions. Getting book publishers to pay in exchange for the 'free advertising' would not be a good solution, as this could stop reviewers from publishing critical reviews, and there could be an unfair allocation of reviews dependent on the ability of the publisher or book author to pay. Although ideally review articles would be available open access, this should not be the priority while it is still so difficult to get funding to publish primary research.

Better funding and working conditions for academics would likely alleviate many of the problems in academic reviewing, as Publisher 2 explicitly recommended. More stable career paths for early career researchers would decrease (though not eliminate) the power disparity between reviewers and book authors. If academics had more time, writing book reviews was adequately recognised, or proper training was given in how to write a book review, there may be fewer poor-quality book reviews written and academics would feel their labour was fairly acknowledged. However, the problem of systemic underfunding in academia would be very difficult for one charitable fund to solve.

APPENDIX 1: Data collection methodology for the LRB and LARB datasets

Arcadia bought a single user subscription to the LRB to enable legal full text access. Articles from LRB vol. 32, no.1 (2010) to vol. 42, no.14 (2020) inclusive were examined, and those that reviewed one or more books were retained. The following items of data were parsed from these articles computationally using regular expressions:

Volume

Issue

Title of review article

Reviewer Name

First author of each reviewed book

Title of reviewed book

Total pages of reviewed book or collected volumes

Cost to purchase a print copy of the reviewed book, as given in the review

Publication date of the book, as given in the review (if provided)

ISBN of reviewed book

Imprint name of the reviewed book

Arcadia could collect data from the LARB website in the same way without a subscription, as it is free to access. However, the LARB does not clearly assign articles to separate volumes and issues, so articles by all 5404 contributors from its inception in 2011 up to 1/7/2020 were systematically examined. Articles containing reviews of one or more books were retained, and the following items of data were parsed from these articles computationally using regular expressions:

Reviewer name

Title of review article

Author(s) of reviewed book

Title of reviewed book

Total pages of reviewed book or collected volumes

Publication date of the book, as given in the review (if provided)

ISBN of the reviewed book

Imprint name of the reviewed book

Unlike the LRB, the LARB as standard do not include within their reviews the retail price of a hard copy of the book being reviewed, so this information could not be collected from the reviews.

For both sets of data, manual-coding from the given imprint name was used to additionally annotate the data with the ownership of the imprint of the reviewed book, in 2020, and whether the publisher is a university press or not.

Data on all known, peer-reviewed open access books included in the Directory of Open Access Books (DOAB) was downloaded on 1/8/2020 in CSV format.⁵² It should be noted that not all of the 29,687 books listed on the DOAB had valid ISBNs, and some open access books are missing from the DOAB (for example, Cambridge University Press lists 80 books available on its website open access⁵³, but only 14 are listed on the DOAB).⁵⁴

Where only an ISBN-10 number was given, the ISBN-10 number was converted to an ISBN-13 format using <https://isbnconverter.sampo.co.uk/>. The data was then cleaned and standardised to ensure that there were no non-ISBN-13 compliant characters. Finally the list of ISBN numbers was computationally cross-matched to the list of known DOAB-listed open access book ISBNs, using the open source command-line utility comm, which is part of the [GNU coreutils package](#) version 8.28.

This process was mostly successful, but failed to identify that *Matches: A Light Book* (punctum books) is a born open access book. In the DOAB, the ISBNs for this book are recorded as 9781950192212 and 9781950192229, but in the LARB the ISBN is given as 0692541733, which when converted from ISBN-10 to ISBN-13 given 9780692540732. These may have represented different editions of the book, with the DOAB only listing one. In this case, the book was recognised as open access by manual examination, with the knowledge that punctum books only publishes born open access books.

APPENDIX 2 - PARTICIPANT LABELS:

⁵² <http://www.doabooks.org/doab?func=csv>

⁵³ Cambridge University Press: www.cambridge.org , accessed 24/08/20.

⁵⁴ Directory of Open Access Books: www.doabooks.org , accessed 24/08/20
<https://www.doabooks.org/doab?func=publisher&pId=1244&uiLanguage=en>

CODE	BRIEF DESCRIPTION
Publisher 1	Established independent academic open access publisher
Publisher 2	Independent open access publisher
Publisher 3	UK open access university press
Publisher 4	US open access university press
Publisher 5	UK hybrid university press
Librarian 1	US College subject librarian
Librarian 2	UK university humanities librarian
Librarian 3	UK university subject librarian
Researcher 1	UK-based history mid-career researcher
Researcher 2	UK-based history senior researcher
Researcher 3	UK-based ancient history senior researcher
Researcher 4	UK-based independent history/theology researcher
Researcher 5	UK-based early career history researcher
Researcher 6	UK-based early career literature and scholarly communications researcher
Researcher 7	UK-based mid-career archaeology researcher
Researcher 8	UK-based PhD student