

Interview with François Van Schalkwyk (African Minds), 18/10/22.

Scholar-Led publishers share some common values around scaling small, removing barriers to open, bibliodiversity and non-competition. Tell me about the impetus to start up your press- why did you decide to found it? What needs were you hoping to meet?

I think there were two things. One is that we felt that there wasn't enough publication voices from Africa contributing to scientific knowledge. There was under-representation, and this was partly due to a lack of opportunity to participate in the publishing ecosystem globally. That could be for a variety of reasons. We felt that African minds could fill that gap in part, so that we would become another venue for publication.

Secondly, it was also to try and make whatever we published more accessible to the entire continent. Open Access was one way of achieving that. It's a little bit uncomfortable to me that it's harder for us to get physical copies around to people in, Africa because it seems like they should be as entitled as anyone else to access printed copies. But at least with Open Access, we can say with confidence that the book is available in electronic format to anyone who has access to the internet. So those were the two primary drivers: more opportunities to publish, but also, equal or ubiquitous access for everyone who wishes to read our publication.

Are you incorporated? As what? Why?

We are a non-profit organization whose legal status is that of a trust. One of the reasons that we went for that, that format is they're kind of interlinked, so the trust part's not so important, in the sense that trusts are heavily taxed here and in many ways are not that different from corporations. There are limitations in terms of control, and there are no shareholders as such. There are only the trustees. So that part was important. It allowed us to do two or three other things which were more important to us, firstly to become a not-for-profit organization. That in itself was important because we wanted to show our authors, readers and potentially funders, of which we've only had one, that we are not doing this for profit. This is not an initiative designed to create money for the trustees or for any other investor, shareholder, et cetera, but to contribute to the knowledge project, for lack of a better description. To generate accessible knowledge is the primary goal, rather than to generate profits in a commercial sense.

Once we were an NPO there's an additional process in South Africa, which is probably the hardest of the three, and that is to register as what is called a public benefit organization or PBO. Because everything has to have an acronym. And to register as a public benefit organization, you have to demonstrate that the organization acts in the good of the good of the public. You have to prove it to the receiver of revenue. That was particularly difficult. We had three attempts before we were finally successful. The reason for that is that we were selling books as part of our dissemination strategy. So even though the books are

Open Access, they also can be purchased because we can't put them on online platforms with zero value for sale. So they have to have some value. And the receiver always found it difficult to square the fact that we're selling books with the fact that we're public benefit organization, but we eventually got that message through to them and we are now public benefit organization. We have to keep that status. It's not in eternity, we have to keep reapplying, but because of that, it means we don't have to pay the tax rate that the trust pays and we can use the surplus income for publishing activities rather than paying it out to tax. So it's a little bit complicated, but that's how it all ties together.

So you had to become a trust in order to become an NPO?

Yes, and in order to become a public benefit organization. It was a sequence of events.

Regarding the governance of your press your size: what resources, elements and/or actors are involved in and/or subject to it?

The two obvious ones are firstly the financial resources, because we have a BPC or Book Processing Charge model, there's money coming in. So financial resources that are coming into the organization, and those have to be managed in a particular way that is responsible in terms of the ambitions or objectives of the trust. Secondly there are the human resources, which is particularly challenging because we are small, and we don't generate that much income. So we have to be very careful about committing to human resources. But at the same time, we want to act responsibly towards those human resources, we want to pay them fairly. We want them to have good interactions with us, not as an employer because we don't employ them, but as an entity. We want a few freelancers that we work with, but on good terms, rather than using many and going through, lots of them to get the cheapest possible rates out there. So I think those two resources are quite important. The technical resources also take up a lot of time. That doesn't come so much into the high-level governance, in the sense that there are three trustees, and the trustees have to make certain decisions about the financial resources and the human resources. Those trustees don't get too involved in terms of the technical resources. So that that's something that happens at more to operational level and that I can decide without having to confer or consult the other trustees. But for me to employ someone or to pay someone a certain amount, or to charge a certain amount, those are all things that are regulated by the trustees. Because we produce the audited financial statements, and those are presented and trustees' meetings. And then those are the queries and questions that emerge from, from the trustees.

And that's a three-person organization?

Yes, exactly. And maybe I should add as contextual information that the trustees are not very hands-on. It's quite difficult to get them even onto email, let into a room to have a meeting. So we only meet twice a year. Even that's quite difficult to pull off sometimes because they have their own commitments. They're not in their seventies or sixties, retired, sitting on boards. They have their own jobs and careers, so they're quite busy. So I tend to do a lot of things on my own, but there are limits to what I can do.

Did you choose the trustees?

Yes, but it was a very informal process. It wasn't that I specifically went looking for trustees. They were people who were already in my academic network. It wasn't a process of soliciting or advertising or looking for particular people. In a sense it's an arrangement of convenience, and shared interests and values from the early onset. We tried to set out clear roles: people would want to know who's the CEO, and who's the CFO, all these titles, and I'm not one for titles very much. But sometimes to the outside world, it seems to just help to clarify various roles and, and position. I still don't really have a title other than trustee, and neither do the others, but I think, other than saying that they are ambassadors for the press, we never really discussed the extent to which they would contribute to the management or success of the press.

Talk about the evolution of your governance structure and process? Did you use or adapt any external principles, guidelines or toolkits? Did you consider any?

It evolved from being more ad-hoc initially. I think the formalization process was driven by two factors. One was from the authors themselves. I was involved in a publishing services company, so we were selling services to NGOs and academics who needed things edited, proofread, et cetera. It was, it was purely on a service basis. But some of them wanted an imprint, they wanted a publisher. They didn't just want a service provider. So that forced the initial arrangement, which was very ad-hoc and loose, to become more formalized: to create African Minds as an entity rather than just as a name or a brand. But at the same time, I was keen to make that happen. I saw the value of not just being a service provider, but creating a publisher that could then do these other things that I mentioned earlier. Not just service these authors, but really make knowledge more accessible. The two other trustees shared that ambition. Although it's still very much a personal project. I brought them into the project rather than the three of us starting it collectively.

How does governance operate now, regarding mechanisms like election, role appointment and consensus-seeking? How are conflicts and complaints dealt with?

As I said earlier, we meet twice a year. That's established, and generally we've stuck to that for the last ten or so years. It's become a little bit easier with virtual meetings becoming the norm. So people that can't make physical meetings can join. One of the problems of being only three trustees is that if one doesn't attend, it's quite a shortcoming. So we always try and have all three of us present in order to meet. As I said, the trustees are fairly hands-off. They're not involved in day-to-day operations. At times I might reach out to them to help find peer reviewers, but that would be the only time I engage with them other than at the trustee meetings. At those meetings, or at least one of them, we would always present the audited financial accounts so that they can be approved, and questions can be asked. So we do go through a formal audit process. That's costly to us. In a sense it's a bit of a grudge

purchase, but on the other hand, it is important. When people ask us for our financials, they're available and they are audited and we happily share them. We're not particularly secretive about financial matters. There have been conflicts in the trustee meetings. I suppose because all three of us are academics, there is a natural familiarity with resolving conflict, because it happens between academics all the time when you are co-authoring papers or working on projects together. There is always an attempt to reach a consensus. We have also often toyed with the fact that maybe we need a larger board. But appointing and removing trustees is a very lengthy and complicated process, in South Africa at least. We were four trustees at one point and one trustee resigned. Three trustees is the minimum. So we're right on the threshold at the moment. Her resigning caused endless administrative problems with banks and, and other entities. So we've taken the decision not to appoint new trustees, but to invite new people onto the Board even though they're not officially trustees. So they broaden the conversation. They might help with that conflict resolution, if there are conflicts that arise. They play an ambassadorial role for the press. We think they can bring value, but they wouldn't have any kind of legal status or control over the entity. We've invited one person onto the Board and she's attended one meeting so far. The plan is to probably invite two or three more people to the Board as time goes, as time goes on.

So if those people voted on an issue, that wouldn't kind of have any legal power, but it might influence the trustees?

Yes, they are there for their input. It wouldn't be legally binding. We've never had a situation nor would I ever anticipate us getting to a situation where we actually vote. I think that's again linked to the academic background. Academics don't generally do that. We're not democratic in that sense. We try and reach consensus to, through discussion and agree, maybe with some concessions in the end, but it's not that common to put things to a simple vote or show of hands. We've never done that. And again, if it was the three of us, it would be awkward, because it would be two versus one, which is not a healthy dynamic.

What written policies do you have and make available?

We have deeds that we had to lodge to register the trust, but the mere fact that I can't remember tells you that they don't play a very big role in how we operate. I probably haven't looked at them or read that document since we drafted it back in 2012. So in terms of the running of the governance of a business, there isn't really anything that we refer to regularly. No one at the trustee meeting will say, 'let us go back to that document and see what it says'. The only time I can remember it coming into play was when the trustee resigned and we had to go and look and see what the protocol is for, when a trustee resigns. What do they have to do? How does that work? Now we have fewer than four trustees, and that's the minimum number of trustees required, et cetera. So no formal policies. The policies that exist are more operational around peer review et cetera, they're not around governance issues per se.

What institutions or organisations do you have relationships with? How does this influence the governance of the press?

We're completely independent. I don't think it was a deliberate decision. I think it was more a decision that was forced upon us. We had discussions about linking up with universities. Maybe getting a group of universities together to form a press, even with one university becoming *their* press, in the very early days. But that just never went anywhere, as much as we tried. It was just becoming too complicated. That might actually have convinced us and that to maintain our independence gives us more flexibility. I think that's still the case. When we interact with the university presses, the independence and flexibility is something that we value more. But of course we don't have institutional support that they do in terms of other resources. It depends on the press, but some presses have guarantees from their institutions if things go pear shaped, they'll step in, things like that. Obviously, we don't have any of that backup from an institution. But also it sometimes complicates our relationships in the bigger publishing landscape. That's been quite interesting for us. The Scholar-Led experience has been good because we've found other kinds of presses, more similar to us, whereas when we relate to university presses, there are always these sorts of key differences. The presses that are part of, of Scott led are also fairly independent and the same as us, often started by one or two individuals. They might be *at* a university but not formally linked to the university. So we share a lot of that in common. I work at a university, and both of the other trustees do too. Well, one is now a science council, but was a university when we were founded, and the other one's also at a university. So we have close ties to universities personally for our work, but not through African Minds.

How do you feel now about the governance of your press in relation to your aim and missions? Is there anything you would like to improve and develop?

At the moment, from a personal perspective – I'm not speaking on kind of on behalf of African Minds, but as someone that has to manage the day to day of the, of the press – I have sufficient autonomy to do that. But at the same time, as I said, the audit process is a bit of a grudge purchase for me. I think: 'That's a book I could produce, instead of paying the auditors'. But at the same time, I suppose it does introduce some mechanism of accountability for the trustees, so that they can allow me to carry on. It's not as though they don't know what's going on and there isn't some kind of oversight from an external third party. That is provided. So I think I, at the moment, other than broadening the, the representation on the Board to get more a diverse perspective, things are things are going fairly well. From a governance point of view, I think things are going fairly well. As I said earlier, the only thing that could be improved is more investment of time and maybe commitment from the other trustees. Because they have their own priorities and I feel like I carry African Minds with me all the time, no matter where I am. It's something I can speak about or I'll introduce people to, and I'm not sure that they are as invested.