

## **Interview with Alessandra Tosi (Open Book Publishers), 19/10/22.**

**ScholarLed 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?**

We are one of the oldest in the landscape of born Open Access publishers in the humanities and social sciences. We started as a humanities Press, then expanded to social sciences and then eventually to the sciences. It was very much a response to the value of Open Access, which we didn't see reflected in book publishing as much as in sciences or journal publishing. Our initiative really stems from what I suppose is my personal experience as a scholar and author. In particular, my monograph relating to lesser-known Russian authors turned out to be unaffordable for Russian scholars. The pool of readers for that book is small due to the specialized topic, and I was shocked that this target audience couldn't be reached by a commercial publication. Like many first-time authors I didn't think to check the contract I was offered, or ask about pricing. It never really crossed my mind as an author, because I equated publication with readership. After publication I thought, 'Wait a minute, why is this book so expensive? I submitted a camera-ready file. I'm not earning anything and yet my readers cannot access it'. That publishing model seemed completely wrong to me. The more I looked into it, the more I thought, 'this system is so widespread, but it shouldn't be the case'.

So it really stems from frustration and also the realization that Rupert and I, and eventually our co-director William St Clair, were in a privileged position as Cambridge academics. We thought we should really do something with that privilege and enact change. Surely in the digital age, the tools to publish research are available to academics. On the back of my experience of creating a camera-ready copy of my book, we thought it was worth a try. That was the basic idea.

A few years down the line, the question of expanding even further naturally presented itself as there was now a great need, a great demand for Open Access scholarly works and textbooks. We thought about it, and decided actually, we didn't want to expand. The 'scaling small' term came later, but the idea that, rather than growing Open Book Publishers, we should grow a community of diverse presses was born then. We really wanted others to be doing things differently in the Open Access landscape, and asked, how could we facilitate that? Our involvement in the COPIM project stems from that idea.

**Are you incorporated? As what? Why?**

For us, the choice was really between a charity and social enterprise. We wanted to set up something that was by Charter obliged to fulfil social aims, in this case to provide high-quality Open Access scholarly work. Of course, we have to break even, but we didn't want it to become a money-making enterprise down the line, if it was very successful and perhaps changed hands. We wanted to protect that idea, and the social enterprise seemed to us to be the best way of doing so because it's much less legalistic than a charity. A charity requires

a more complex set up. We wanted something quite flexible, but at the same time able to protect this idea of non-profit. So that's why we went with the social enterprise form. Setting it up was fairly cheap as well, because of course, we didn't have any funding whatsoever. It was all funded by us personally, so that was another consideration. The UK government also provided support in setting up and a small grant to cover the legal costs, which helped in the early stages.

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

OBP adopted a pyramid-like structure. I am the managing director of the publishing side, whilst Rupert Gatti is in charge of the operational group, who concern themselves with software development, policy, and also related projects such as COPIM. At OBP we divided it in this way simply because of our personal inclinations. Our third director, who died about eighteen months ago, was more of an overseer. He wasn't involved in the day-to-day running of these two branches, but we would have regular meetings. Before becoming an academic he served in the Treasury, so he contributed expertise about finances and regulations. He was a fantastic co-director to have. Our governance structure hasn't really changed since his death, as he didn't take part in the day-to-day running of OBP. Rupert Gatti and I, as co-directors, are in charge, but we rely on our [Advisory Board](#) to advise us at regular intervals.

Initially we would contact the Advisory Board just for specific questions relating to their area of expertise, but we are now having virtual meetings at least twice a year to talk about the general direction of OBP. Moreover, one of these board members is also a point of contact for potential authors, who want to know more about the experience of publishing with us. With some of the other board members we discuss other projects related to Open Access publication, for example we will work with them on typology or on related areas. In that sense the Advisory Board has gotten much more involved, even though it is still Rupert and I, as co-directors, who make most of the decisions.

In addition to the Advisory Board we have several [Series boards](#), who oversee specific book series. There's also an interest in having an umbrella board or structure to bring these groups together, although we haven't yet implemented this idea and at the moment the Series boards are focused on their own series and their subject experience.

### **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 started with just Rupert and I. Then we invited William, because we appreciated having an additional perspective from somebody we regarded very highly. The idea of an Advisory Board is taken from the Advisory Board structure that journals often adopt. We thought it would be good to have regular feedback from an authoritative group of scholars, and this initially also served as a guarantee for potential authors that we were a high-quality Press

founded on rigorous academic principles. The composition of the Board has changed over time – for example we specifically invited female academics to improve the gender balance – whilst some Board members left because they retired. We tried to invite younger people, we tried to mix it up a little bit more and have scholars from other geographical areas, although we are very much a UK-based publisher run by an international staff.

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

We haven't had any conflicts or complaints, but we have a complaint procedure in place. As we're a small company, we have regular discussions with staff about our plans as a Press, and we do likewise with the Advisory Board as already discussed. The final decisions rest with the co-Directors, Rupert and I. This system has seemed to work well so far.

### **So they are quite polycentric, the circles are quite self-contained?**

Yes, but we have plans to organize an umbrella meeting this year. The different time zones are a challenge, but we have started having two twin meetings on different time zones to allow everybody to participate. Overall we've been very lucky as all the Board members take part. They all seem to be very positive and encouraging. Perhaps this is because there isn't a voting system. There is no legal obligation to participate; perhaps then therefore there is no conflict. We've invited people onto the boards: it's a mix of authors who we thought were particularly passionate about Open Access, and people who are well known in their field. We wanted to cover representation of different fields. Initially it was just the humanities and one person with experience of software development. Now we try to look broadly, although of course it's impossible to have a full representation across all subjects and areas.

### **What written policies do you have and make available?**

The financial accounts are publicly available. We have a lot of information about how we operate on our website, and about our vision and who we are. We have a breakdown of our financial model and our accounts, which are available on the Companies House website anyway. We have several blogs explaining how we work and our business model: how we break even financially, how many titles we produce, and our costs. On our team page we have the two directors and team members. We thought that was probably enough. Then we have our vision, how we set up as academics, a bit more of the story of it. We also have descriptions of the people and their roles, and how we are set up as a social enterprise.

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

We are an independent press. We don't get umbrella funding for OBP. We have relationships that concern the book series we publish, which indirectly involve a number of universities and research groups. These series entail different levels of financial funding and collaboration, but this doesn't have any impact on our autonomy. In one case, for example, one series could rely on funding to sustain the publication of titles within the series, but this doesn't give them any governance rights. We really treasure that independence, which allows us to move nimbly and in the directions we deem important.

**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?**

We are happy with our governance structure, but it would be nice to have more resources. I think that's a common theme, not just for social enterprises, but for any charity or not-for-profit initiative. Everybody's understaffed and overworked, I suppose that's the nature of it. In an ideal world it would be nice to have some funding just to employ more people to do exactly what we're doing, but at the same time allowing us to collaborate further. For example, in terms of structure and governance, it would be useful to involve more people, including our authors with a specific interest in Open Access. However, this type of interaction requires time to be properly coordinated and productive.