Interview with Mercedes Bunz (meson press), 07/11/202

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 our situation was a bit different than the situation of the other presses because we come out of a bigger research project which was at the Leuphana University of Lüneburg. It was a sort of a research group into hybrid publishing. That group was much bigger than just us three who are now meson press. It involved other people working with open-source projects, with publishing projects, with the digitalization of a PDF reader and everything that was linked to digital technologies. So it's not that we were founded on common values. We were founded on a framework that there was money to found a press. It was more that here were these research positions to be filled, and at that time I was director of the hybrid publishing lab. And so Andreas and Marcus came, and when it came to the press, amongst the whole group it was very clear that we three were used to working together We work very well together and shared the same interests in media studies. So that was what brought us together I think: a combination of having a framework where we had to fit in and then shared interests.

Are you incorporated? As what? Why?

We are a co-operative limited company. It's a particular German form that was simply right form because as you know, we are scholar-led, business is not in our foreground. We were looking for a form that was not very complex bureaucratic wise. We are founded in Germany. Germany has a particular situation where it's fairly easy to create a limited company. In the UK it's really very difficult. You need to have, I don't know how much money, £50,000 or something around that price. I've I founded a limited company before in Germany. I know it's really difficult in the UK. The tax situation is very thorough. We were looking for a version that would allow us to be a business, but where we could put our content first, and have that in the foreground.

In the UK a cooperative is quite a specific legal form where it has to be owned equally by its members, is that the case in Germany?

That's the case in Germany too, but you can do the same with the limited company. There's no difference in Germany between a limited company and a co-operative. It was super easy to incorporate. With a limited company, everybody has the same shares and puts in the same money at the start. But the difference is, for example with a cooperative, you don't need to have much capital to start off with. I mean, you have to have some, but it was really

minimal compared to what you need to put in for a limited company. It's called *Genossenschaft* in German, and its fairly often used. There are eight thousand of them.

Did you have to demonstrate your that you were a public good to anyone? Because a lot of the presses when they wanted to incorporate had trouble some trouble with that. Say they wanted to become a charity, they had to demonstrate to the Charity Commission that they were serving a public good, and quite often publishers are not perceived in that way.

No, I don't think so. We had to mention it. We had to define the company and fill in a form and you officially to become the form of a co-operative. As part of it you define what you are going to do. But it's not that you have to prove it.

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

Definitely computers. It was a little different in the past. We started out to work together, and for the first few years for the first two years, we probably met every second week because we worked at the same university. That stopped after a certain time. So ever since that we've worked more remotely. I think the whole digital infrastructure plays a tremendous part. And we were also lucky because we had this funding from the research project so that we could have a WordPress website which is I think our main technological framework that is outward facing. We also worked with a book designer and with an online designer, to work together. We spent quite a bit of research money on them creating the templates and layout and the whole design of what we look like, where we are going. I think for the beginning and for the outward facing side of the press, this is has been really important. Because we have a certain look, we have a certain font, we have a certain design, and that design was intended from the beginning to be very online because we don't have the book titles, for example, on the books, we have keywords. So if someone uses 'the' or 'of', it is a lot of times not on the book. So I think these two people, the designers who worked with us, shaped us as much as our ideas shaped us. People often forget about that, but it's really what the people see in the end, and feel in the end. To a certain extent the aesthetic is why they come to us.

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?

I think again, because we come out of this research project, our whole idea was a bit

different because the whole framework was asking, what is publishing? what aspects are important in publishing? And as I said particularly the design, technological streamlining, that was really, really important for us. I think we got our heads around that as much as I think a lot of other presses are content driven, in the sense they thought, 'these are first three books. Wonderful. This is the direction we want to go in'. We come from a very different direction where we didn't have any books. It was also not us, nor our friends who wanted to write them. It was more that there was a request to found an Open Access press. I have a publishing background because I was running a magazine for electronic music and digital culture before. So I knew roughly what was involved in publishing. We all were media studies scholars, and it was very clear that we wanted to study media, I think Open Access is really the form everybody should publish in, I don't think we have this strong, "Oh, it must be open" impetus. We had this discussion: we were an Open Access research group, including some radical people who said the Creative Commons license is not really open because if you don't allow businesses to use something, that's not open, if it's just non-commercial. There were all kinds of political views in the bigger research group. I don't think we were founded around really strong Open Access values. We were all interested in publishing but, I think we were as interested in design. We were founded in 2015 but we started to work together in 2012. So before the founding of the publisher, we had already commissioned books as the test run. Because people can't write books so fast, we commissioned translations in the beginning. So we started out with translations and then stopped that.

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

We have not changed the people involved since the beginning. We had a discussion, because the work is too much for us, whether we want to add people and all of us three said no. There seems to be a shared understanding in decision making, and we all think it's fairly easy to communicate with each other and that another person would shift the balance. We don't really have conflicts. Sometimes we have a longer discussion, but it's not conflict. We all take a step back. Of somebody really wants to do something and the other people don't think they would die on it, then we just let people do what they want to do. We don't have a steering board. Everyone has slightly different interests. Whenever you find cinematic publications, they have been contributed by him Andreas. I work a lot with Wendy Chun, and Marcus has a lot of interests, more maybe in media history and data. So I think we bring different sides to the table, but we all like each other's sides. I just was at 50 Years of Radical Philosophy who are now Open Access at last. The discussions they had on that, we never had these kind of, hardcore differences or the idea that we need a different steering side.

So it's never gone as far as a vote?

No.

And you don't have an external Advisory Board?

No, and that was a question, if we should have one or not. I think we might have created one at some point, but never really made use of that. We ask for peer reviews if there's an issue about a book and let's say two are strongly for it, and one is really strongly against it, then we get peer reviewers, and they help with finding a decision.

What written policies do you have and make available?

I think we don't make them available publicly, maybe because of tax reasons, because if you make it public then it's public to the tax authorities as well.

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

I still have a relationship with Leuphana University. Because I know a guy who was my boss back then, I was just on a call with him because he publishes and he's an editor on one of our series. So there is a relationship. And there's also a relationship to Gary Hall, who was our external support.

But does the press have a formal relationship with any institution, say in terms of offering funding support?

No. We all worked all for two years at Leuphana and a lot of people from that time that worked at Leuphana published with us. They went on then to other things. Some are at different universities, but some are still at that university. There's no official funding. We have an address that is in Luneburg, but none of us lives there. The two others live in Cologne. I live in Folkstone at the seaside. I think what's very important for us and what also again might make us a bit of a different situation is that because we are located in Germany and we always had this situation that we are a German Open Access press. We decided right from the start that we wanted to publish in English. We also publish some work in German but our main publishing language is English. It took quite some years before the first book came out. And at the same time, in Germany, if you have a PhD, you must publish it. You

don't get your doctor title or your PhD title unless you published your dissertation. And that changed the situation for all the publishers in Germany, because here it is quite normal that people take an author processing fee even without Open Access. So that meant for us as an Open Access press, the model of author processing fees, while for other presses might be politically difficult, in Germany it was quite normal that everyone who did a PhD had to pay a few thousand to publish their book. So we have it fairly easy because we don't we don't need to look out for funding. I can tell you we're making nearly no money from the print. Its minimal, really. We have quite low fees I think compared with other publishers. We have low Open Access fees as Author Processing Fees.

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?

I think one problem that I see with scholarly led presses is that there's not enough time to work on the infrastructure of the press. I know, because my niece works at Fitzcarraldo Publishing which is a successful but small publisher of literature that is not Open Access, that small publishing houses drown in tasks anyhow. We really do struggle with finding enough time to do the work. Even finding someone to do the infrastructure work for you is time-intense. So even if you say, 'OK, what about if there was more money?' No, it would still be time consuming. Regarding the values? No, I think we're quite happy. I would say Open Access has become more normal compared to when we started out, when you had to explain to people constantly, particularly to people publishing in the US, what this was about. And that has become much better. I think there is also more funding. There is a little bit more funding available for authors to be supported to publish with us, which is also nice. So these are the two positive developments. But because we're so small and we get along quite well, the governance overall I think is good. It really looks like this: I just got an e-mail today from Marcus saying 'What do you think? We have this book? Here's the summary. Here's the material. What does everybody think?' Then we start a thread, and make a decision and at some point. If somebody would think, 'OK, this book is really important', then we would probably say, 'Can we have a video chat about this please?', if you would go in a different direction, and try to explain.