Samuel Moore — publishing, technology, commons

How to cultivate good closures: 'scaling small' and the limits of openness

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Open access publishing has always had a difficult relationship with smoothness and scale. Openness implies seamlessness, limitlessness or structureless-ness – or the idea that the removal of price and permission barriers is what's needed to allow research to reach its full potential. The drive for seamlessness is on display in much of the push for **interoperability** of standards and persistent identifiers that shape the infrastructures of

openness. Throughout the evolution of open access, many ideas have been propagated around, for example, the necessity of CC BY as the one and only licence that facilitates this interoperability and smoothness of access and possible reuse. Similarly, failed projects such as **One Repo** sought to create a single open access repository to rule them all, in response to the perceived messy and stratified institutional and subject repository landscape.

Yet this relationship between openness and scale also leads to new kinds of closure, particularly the commercial closures of walled gardens that stretch across proprietary services and make researcher data available for increasing user surveillance. The economies of scale of commercial publishers require cookie-cutter production processes that remove all traces of care from publishing, in exchange for APCs and BPCs, thus ensuring that more publications can be processed cheaply with as little recourse to paid human labour as possible. Smoothness and scale are simply market enclosures by another name.

When Janneke and I were writing our **'scaling small'** article, we were particularly interested in exploring alternative understandings of scale that preserve and facilitate difference and messiness for open access book publishing. How can we nurture careful and bibliodiverse publishing through open access infrastructures when it is exactly this difference and complexity that commercial forms of sustainability want to standardise at every turn? In outlining 'scaling small', we looked to the commons as a way of thinking through these issues.

As a mode of production based on collaboration and self-organisation of labour, the commons was a natural fit for the kinds of projects we were involved in. We charted the informal mutual reliance – what we referred to as the latent commons, borrowing from Anna Tsing (2017) – within the Radical Open Access Collective right through to the expansive formality of the COPIM project. In doing so, we illustrated the different forms of organisation that facilitate alternative publishing projects that stand in opposition to the market as the dominant mode of production. Scaling small is primarily about how open access can be sustained if we embed ourselves in each other's projects and infrastructures in a way that has 'global reach but preserves local contexts' (Adema and Moore 2021). It is a reminder that the commons is an active social process rather than a fixed set of open resources available to all.

In their posthumously released book *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, Lauren Berlant writes against a fixed understanding of the commons that 'merely needs the world to create infrastructures to catch up with it' (Berlant 2022). Instead, for Berlant, the 'better power' of the commons is to 'point to a way to view what's broken in sociality, the difficulty of convening a world conjointly'. From our perspective, the commons is about revealing how hard it is to scale small in a world dominated by the need for big, homogenising

platforms. It is not, then, about having a fixed understanding of the infrastructures necessary for open access publishing but more about experimenting with the different kinds of socialities that may allow experimental infrastructures of different scales and formalities to flourish.

This is why scaling small reveals the limits of openness and forces us to instead cultivate good closures (echoing the 'good cuts' of Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylinska's (2012) reading of Karen Barad) based on what we want to value ethically and politically. So rather than leaving everything to the structureless-ness of market-centric openness, through COPIM we learn how to deal with the fact that things like governance, careful publishing and labour-intensive processes do not scale well according to economic logic. In my time on the COPIM project, for example, I learned how community governance requires pragmatic decision-making and norms of trust within the community; it is not something that can be completely organised through rules and board structures. Yet we still proceed to build these structures to see what works and what doesn't, relying on the fact that we all share a broad horizon of better, more ethical futures for book publishing.

Yet of course, antagonism still exists within and outside the COPIM project. Is it OK that the models and infrastructures being developed within this community are being extracted from it by commercial publishers? Bloomsbury, for example, has just proudly announced it is the first commercial book publisher to utilise the kind of collective funding model being developed by COPIM, Open Library of Humanities, and other scholar-led publishers. How is it possible to scale small when a big commercial actor is waiting to take what you have developed and piggyback on it for commercial gain? Do we engage with commercial publishers or keep them at arms' length?

Again, part of the answer to this question lies in sociality, or the fact that COPIM has managed to carve out a pretty unique situation in neoliberal higher education that has brought together a vast array of likeminded people and organisations with an explicit goal of undermining the monopolisation of commercial publishers in place of community-led approaches. Coupled with the move to diamond open access journals that is gaining traction particularly in continental Europe, we have an important counter-hegemonic project being formed around communities cross-pollinating with one another rather than competing. Commercial publishers may treat COPIM's work as free R&D but it cannot extract the social glue that keeps it together and sets it apart from marketised models.

This is why I am so excited about the recent announcement of **Open Book Futures** and its potential to further reach out to and engage libraries, infrastructure providers and communities outside the Global North, increasing the messiness that allows us to scale small. As someone now working in one, I am especially pleased to see libraries treated as partners rather than a chequebook – as is too often the case with new open access initiatives – and given meaningful governance over the future of the Open Book Collective.

Scaling small will only work if libraries are understood as part of the community and part of the cross-pollination at work. Without this, there is a danger that the additional labour of collections librarians is undervalued or objectified as a tool for the provision of open access, even though it is a crucial and active facilitator of the smallness we desire.

As an interdisciplinary, multi-practitioner group of advocates for better publishing futures, I hope we can also consider how scaling small may help transform our professional networks away from the commercially driven conservatism of learned societies and towards expansive forms of mutual reliance and care within and between them. In doing so, it can help build the necessary chains of equivalence between previously disparate learned societies and member organisations, allowing us to turn our attention to the brutally individuating structures of marketised academia (which, at bottom, is the bigger issue at hand).

So in conclusion, I hope to have conveyed in these short remarks that scaling small is, above all, a project of sociality, building new connections and getting together in different ways, and not simply or even primarily about the publications and resources being produced and shared. The point is to continue learning how to hold onto this social and biblio-diversity through the decisions we take and the institutional closures we enact, particularly as more and more actors become involved. Viewed in this light, scaling small reveals the limits of openness and the necessity of cultivating good closures with other (inconvenient) people.

Work cited:

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