

Feature Article

Open Access Books: Knowledge Unlatched

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Although digital technology has, in theory, made it possible for many more people to access content at no extra cost, fewer people than ever before are able to read the books written by university-based researchers.

This article looks, very briefly, at the role that open access licenses might play in reviving the scholarly monograph: a specialised area of academic publishing that has seen sales decline by more than 90% over the past three decades. It also introduces a new approach to funding open-access scholarly books being pioneered by the not-for-profit social enterprise [Knowledge Unlatched](#).

The Rise and Fall of the Monograph

The current system for publishing scholarly books is not working for anyone. Monographs in the humanities and social sciences, in particular, are caught in a negative cycle of rising prices and decreasing sales. How did monographs get into this mess? And what might be done to save them?

Monographs have long been valued by the humanities and social sciences as a form of writing that allows single subjects to be explored in depth and complex theoretical arguments to be developed.

During their heyday they were a lucrative business. In the 1960s monographs were almost always published in hardback, often with a simultaneous paperback edition. The rapid expansion of higher education after the Second World War was associated with a library-driven boom in monograph sales as university libraries developed and expanded their collections and many individual readers also chose to purchase their own paperback copies.

However, as library budgets got tighter many libraries resorted to buying cheaper paperback editions. Publishers reacted to this by adopting a windowing strategy: publishing hardback versions first and, if a title sold well, bringing out a paperback. Because libraries could not be certain that a paperback version would be published, they had to purchase a hardback. Because publishers couldn't be certain that demand would

warrant a paperback edition, they began loading all of their costs onto the hardback version.

This negative cycle was made worse by growing numbers of scholars who needed to publish books to secure promotion and tenure, as well as sharp increases in the proportion of library budgets being eaten up by journal subscriptions. As more monographs titles were published and library book budgets continued to shrink, individual unit sales went into free-fall and books got more and more expensive.

These days the average monograph retails for around £50. Some sell for as much as £200 and the vast majority never make it to paperback. Most publishers are happy if they sell a few hundred copies of a specialist research monograph, usually as a printed book, to well funded university libraries.

As a result, at a moment when digital technology is, in theory, making it possible for many more people to access content at no extra cost, fewer people than ever before are able to read the books written by university-based researchers.

An Open Future?

The potential for open access to transform access to publically funded research has received a great deal of attention over the past year. However, debate has largely focussed on how the established *journal* system is failing *scientific* communities. Much less attention has been paid to the role that open access might play in helping a deeply inefficient system for publishing scholarly books to find a sustainable way forward.

This is partly a result of the fact that the open-access journal models are unlikely to work effectively for monographs. The fixed production costs associated with a 70,000 – 100,000-word book are much higher than they are for a 2,000 – 5,000 word journal article. The costs of professional editing, high quality peer-review, type-setting, design, marketing, preservation, production and digital delivery mean that even not-for-profit University presses [struggle](#) to keep fixed costs below \$20,000 a title. The cost of printing physical copies only accounts for around 10% of cover prices.

Limited Humanities and Social Sciences budgets and high fixed production costs mean that it is unlikely that ‘gold’ routes to open access will save the HASS monograph.

Furthermore, although academics would like to see their books available more widely and at lower prices, the vast majority value the services that professional book publishers provide and recognise that these need to be paid for. Having a book published by a well-regarded publisher is seen as an important achievement: signifying not just that a book has been peer-reviewed, but also that an experienced publisher has deemed it likely to enhance the reputation of their press and worth taking a commercial risk.

Knowledge Unlatched

Knowledge Unlatched has gone back to the basics in order to find a way beyond this impasse. Experienced academic publisher and founder of Knowledge Unlatched, Dr Frances Pinter, began with the simple observation that most of the

money that now pays for monograph publishing comes from library budgets.

The role of libraries as the only purchasers of monographs has resulted in a market that is simply unsustainable in its current form. However, it is also an important advantage when it comes to helping monographs to make the shift to open access.

Knowledge Unlatched has been set up as a not-for-profit organisation in order to help a global community of libraries coordinate their book purchasing activities more effectively. Its goal is to help librarians maximise the positive side effects of what they are already doing: purchasing scholarly books.

As the coordinator of a global library consortium, Knowledge Unlatched will facilitate the payment of a single "Title Fee" to publishers in exchange for books being posted online on open access licenses. The Title Fee is intended to cover the fixed costs of bringing a book to first digital publication. Consortium members will gain access to exclusive discounts on physical copies and premium digital versions, if they wish to purchase them for their collections. And publishers will remain free to continue selling physical versions and premium digital versions of books to the rest of the market through their regular channels.

This is how the model works:

1. Publishers nominate titles that they would like to offer to libraries through the Knowledge Unlatched program.
2. Individual libraries select the books that they would like to include in their col-

lection via their usual library suppliers. They may do this on a book-by-book basis, or by purchasing entire packages (as they do now).

3. When a library chooses to contribute to the costs of 'unlatching' a book they will become eligible for special discounts on physical copies and premium digital versions. Even if a library chooses both the unlatched version and a premium version, the total should still add up to less than libraries already pay for individual monographs.
4. When a minimum number of libraries select the 'unlatched' version, a Title Fee will be paid to publishers in return for making an Open Access digital version available via the Internet for free to anyone who would like to read it.
5. The Title Fee will reflect the fixed costs of publishing each book and provide a small operating margin to ensure that the Knowledge Unlatched model is sustainable. Knowledge Unlatched will negotiate Title Fees with publishers.
6. Publishers will make print copies and premium digital versions of selected titles available to the Knowledge Unlatched member libraries that have selected the 'unlatched' version at a members-only discount rate.
7. Publishers will remain free to sell print copies and premium digital versions to the rest of the market on their own terms.

8. The Knowledge Unlatched Title Fee will mean that publishers don't need to load all of their origination costs onto a hardback version (as currently happens). As a result, it will help lower barriers to the adoption of print, provide flexibility in relation to conventional printing and print on demand and give publishers room to experiment with lower prices more likely to appeal to wider audiences.

Because the Title Fee paid to publishers is a fixed charge, as the number of member libraries grows and the number of titles on offer increases, the price per title per library decreases.

Furthermore, once the number of libraries participating in the consortium has reached scale, this model is expected to be financially self-sustaining: The costs of operating the not-for-profit consortium will be covered by a very small percentage of each Title Fee.

The Knowledge Unlatched model is an attempt to re-coordinate a failing market in order to facilitate a transition to digitally appropriate publishing models that include open access. It offers librarians an opportunity to facilitate the open-access publication of books that their own readers would value access to. It provides publishers with a stable income stream on titles selected by libraries, as well as an ability to continue selling books to a wider market on their own terms.

It is hoped that in inclusion of this wider-market opportunity will encourage publishers to experiment; perhaps publishing books in paperback right away, moving to print on demand, or developing bells-and-whistles premium digital versions that customers are willing to pay extra for.

Knowledge Unlatched is an ambitious project with the potential to profoundly transform the monograph landscape. It is currently gearing up for a first stage global pilot, due to commence in late 2013.

More information about Knowledge Unlatched can be found by visiting:

www.knowledgeunlatched.org.

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