

Funding open access in media studies: The case of mediastudies.press



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This case study recounts the brief history of the open access publisher mediastudies.press, with the aim to draw broader lessons about #openaccess in film, media, and communication studies. The press, which I established in 2018, is scholar-led, nonprofit, and fee-free. It publishes books and a diamond OA journal, *History of Media Studies* (2020-). Mediastudies.press was founded as a self-conscious experiment, with three overlapping motivations: (1) to demonstrate the viability of a collective funding, fee-free approach to OA publishing; (2) to provide a home for book projects underserved by the commercial publishing ecosystem; and (3) to furnish a platform for multimedia and versioned projects particularly appropriate to the kinetic and formally inventive media studies fields. A fourth motivation was more personal. I had begun writing about open access issues in the mid-2010s with gathering interest.[1] My sense was that I ought to learn more about the scholarly publishing landscape if I was to make informed critiques of, and proposals around, the prevailing system. Diving in head first with a small press struck me as a viable – if over-ambitious – means to that end. Thus mediastudies.press was born.

This report touches on the history of the press, its evolving practices, and its plans for the future. Throughout, I draw on parallel experiments both within and beyond media studies, with an attempt to reference the ongoing struggle to reclaim scholarly publishing from the big five oligarchs.[2] That broad campaign, I have concluded, ultimately hinges on an urgent, short-run scaling-up of an alternative approach to funding, one which charges neither readers nor authors.

The collective funding problem

The open access movement was semi-officially kicked off just over 20 years ago, when scholars, librarians, and others gathered in Budapest. The group's 2022 manifesto was, among other things, nonchalant about the question of who should pay for publishing. The point, of course, was to remove the paywall for readers, but the Budapest Open Access Declaration did not say much about who would pick up the bill. The manifesto cited 'many alternative sources', including governments and foundations, universities, and 'friends of the cause of open access'. The Budapest declarees' list ended with a fateful Boolean: 'or even contributions from researchers themselves'. [3]

Just a month before the Budapest gathering, a for-profit publisher (BioMed Central) had announced a processing charge for each article the group would publish – birthing the Author Processing Charge (APC) in the process. [4] Then the high-profile nonprofit Public Library of Science (PLOS) embraced the APC model for its 2003 launch. [5] Soon Springer, the commercial giant, adopted the author fee, settling on \$3,000 – apparently the maximum that funders like the Wellcome Trust would stomach. Springer's peers followed suit, and the APC era was born. Barriers for authors were, in this model, swapped for barriers to readers. [6]

The system only worked for funded natural scientists and scholars from a handful of rich Western countries. The APC model, with its tolled access to authorship, was the subscription model seen through a camera obscura: author paywalls in place of reading paywalls. My own interest in scholarly publishing came to center on what I started calling the 'open authorship' movement. It was plain then, as it is now, that if you can not ask readers to pay, nor authors, the only alternative is to fund publishing directly. [7]

Experiments in what was sometimes called 'collective' or 'consortial' funding began to take off in the early 2010s, at arXiv, Open Library of Humanities, and SCOAP³, among others. The core idea was to ask libraries and other funders to redirect some of their subscription spending to support, directly, open access publishing. The aim was to avoid the author-excluding APC and to enable, instead, what was at the time called 'platinum' or 'diamond' OA.

mediastudies.press was founded, basically, as a rebuke of the APC and its longform cousin, the book publishing charge (BPC). By 2018, when I began thinking seriously about starting a press, I had concluded (along with many others) that an author-excluding OA ecosystem would be worse than the tolled system it aimed to replace. Collective funding experiments were, at the time, gaining traction, and I was convinced that some of the challenges (around

logistics, vetting, and free-ridership) could be met. So I was toying with the idea of a press, though with trepidation: I was a busy academic already overwhelmed by the job's spread of commitments.

Then ScholarLed was born – a consortium of six academic-led, non-profit book publishers. The moment when I saw the Twitter announcement in early 2018 is lodged in my memory. Here was a group of like-minded presses – nonprofit, scholar-led, and fee-free by principle: 'BPCs aggravate already entrenched inequities in access to the means of scholarly publication.' They had me at 'aggravate'.^[8]

mediastudies.press soon incorporated as a nonprofit in Pennsylvania, where I live and work. I recruited an initial board of directors and an advisory board, but the whole thing felt imaginary for at least a year. That year I tested various open-source platforms, including Janeway (for journals) and Manifold (for books), before setting up shop on PubPub, the open-source scholarly publishing platform built by the nonprofit Knowledge Futures in 2019. PubPub's format agnosticism, together with its support for versioning and multimedia, made it possible for the press to operate its book and journal sides on a single platform.^[9]

All the while, I was probing around the collective-funding question. The press proclaimed, with aspirational gusto, that

[p]ublishing with mediastudies.press is free on principle. Our aim is to demonstrate, on a small scale, an open access publishing model supported by libraries rather than author fees. Open access for readers, we believe, should not be traded for new barriers to authorship.^[10]

Our first books, released in late 2020, were a pair of public domain republications, on the theory that dead authors were easier to work with. We had no revenue coming in, of course, and yet faced some serious expenses: copy editing and proofing above all, but also design, software, and memberships in organisations like Crossref. mediastudies.press subsisted on donations, mostly from me but also from board members.^[11] We were learning a lot and refining workflows, but the collective-funding dimension – which, after all, had indirectly motivated the creation of the press – was dormant. I was watching the library membership programs launched by our better-established ScholarLed peers at punctum books and Open Book Publishers. One-off publisher membership schemes like this, however, struck me as burdensome to libraries, with all that repetitive vetting and invoicing. mediastudies.press, meanwhile, had launched a journal.

History of Media Studies

From the beginning, the press had plans to create a journal. David W. Park, Peter Simonson, and I co-founded *History of Media Studies* in summer 2020, with many of the same values that animate mediastudies.press itself. One aim was to address the lack of publishing outlets for studies on the history of film, media, and communication studies. Historians of psychology, economics, anthropology, and sociology were already served by standalone outlets. At the same time, generalist history-of-social science journals were, ironically, often too narrow for a bundle of fields that spans the humanities and social sciences – with the same limitation, in reverse, posed by *History of Humanities*. Thus the new journal was launched to provide a home for rigorous work on the history of our division-spanning, polyglot fields.

The journal's second major purpose was to self-consciously broaden the scope of the fields' historiographies. Most published scholarship, we noted at the time, was centered on North America and Western Europe, and published in English. We positioned *History of Media Studies* to ventilate the literature's parochial character – in part by bringing non-English studies on neglected geographies into conversation with the North Atlantic bearings of the existing historiography. We recruited a notably international editorial board and launched an affiliated working group where scholars from around the globe would share their works-in-progress in remote sessions. We have held three summer symposia with these field-broadening goals in mind, focused on: (1) exclusions; (2) the Americas; and (3) Africa and the African diaspora. The journal has attended, in particular, to Latin American scholars and scholarship, with simultaneous interpretation at events and full support for Spanish-language submissions.[12]

The third guiding motivation for *History of Media Studies* mimics the press itself: we aim to model APC-free OA publishing with support for multimedia and versioning. The journal also commissions and/or accepts a number of non-traditional formats, including overlay republication of relevant articles published elsewhere and contextualised archival materials. A commitment to slow scholarship and care-based review has also marked the journal's short tenure. '*History of Media Studies*', as we wrote in the launch editorial, 'substitutes artisanal editing and humane peer review for ScholarOne and the metric tide.'[13]

So the fee-free model – by then converging on the diamond nomenclature, at least in the journal world – was front-and-center, just as it had been on the book side. But with *History of Media Studies* we faced the same basic problem: how could we go hand-to-hat to libraries

as a single journal, given the unsustainable logistical burdens on the librarians we were asking to cut checks?

The mission-aligned funding exchange

By 2021, I was beginning to question the wisdom of self-funding, with the help of other board members, a volunteer operation. Then I stumbled across the Open Access Community Investment Program (OACIP), an actual, on-the-ground example of what I started to think of as a mission-aligned funding exchange. The idea behind the then-new OACIP was that the program would manage all those pesky logistics: vetting, invoicing, and the ability to ‘invest’ across a number of journals. OACIP was, in effect, a marketplace, albeit of a peculiar kind: a platform for mission-driven libraries to connect with and pledge direct support for nonprofit, no-fee OA journals.[14] This was the collective funding model I had been day-dreaming about. I reached out to Sharla Lair, an OA strategist at LYRASIS, the big North American library consortium, without concealing my giddiness. Yes, I hoped that *History of Media Studies* might join the program’s second round, but more than anything I was excited about the model.

I soon heard rumors about a similar initiative, this one devoted to books. It is a small OA world: many of my peers at scholar-led presses, it turns out, were already involved via a foundation and government-funded project to boost open-access monographs.[15] One of the project’s initiatives was to create an Open Book Collective (OBC), where librarians and other funders could underwrite solo publishers but also, crucially, bundles of like-minded presses.[16] The burdens of vetting, invoicing, and reporting, as with the OACIP case, were offloaded to the exchange itself and funded by a modest tax on the direct funding pledged to publishers. It was that same summer in 2021 when I heard about the nascent OBC effort, as well as a German-language project with similar goals. The confluence of all these projects had me identifying a common match-making model of collective funding, centering on ‘platforms that connect fee-free OA publishers and infrastructure stewards with mission-aligned patrons in the library and foundation worlds’. As I elaborated in a 2021 essay,

These markets, crucially, are not mediated by ‘price’ alone, but instead by alignments in values. Libraries and funders, in other words, furnish direct support to nonprofit, community-led publishers and services on web-based matching platforms that double as fiscal clearinghouses. In this model, funders and recipients alike elaborate mission criteria, with the recipients supplying additional structured information on scope, governance, licensing, and related information.[17]

Hence the mission-aligned funding exchange (MAFE). To me, this development was far more than a potential path to sustainability for mediastudies.press. I had, after all, founded

the press in large part to learn about publishing in an on-the-ground, ISBN-and-all sense. The press was and is a means to an end: to gain knowledge by acquaintance rather than by description alone, to draw on Bertrand Russell's old contrast.[18] From the beginning, my OA interests have centered on the problem of collective funding. The MAFE is the future, I came to believe – and with anticipatory excitement. Thus the chance to participate in the journal-oriented OACIP (in 2021-2022) and the book-centric OBC (since 2023) was a thrilling enactment of my open-authorship values, with the promise of still-more knowledge-by-acquaintance.

Challenges and the future

The press has survived its first five years. We have nine books and three journal volumes under our belt, with four books slated for publication in 2024 – a publication pace that suits the 'scaling small' philosophy common to the ScholarLed presses.[19] In 2022, founding board member David W. Park took on the associate director role. We are particularly excited to publish, in English translation, Mariano Zarowsky's pioneering *Del Laboratorio Chileno a la Comunicación-Mundo: Un Itinerario Intelectual de Armand Mattelart* (2013), with the support of a competitive grant from an Argentinian government program.[20] The Zarowsky project brings together many of our major commitments: to a broadened history of the field, to Latin America in particular, and to direct funding.

Our greatest challenge is, fittingly, interwoven with our mission. As I have described, the core conviction driving the establishment of the press was that a collective funding model could work – one that charged neither readers nor authors. We have had great and promising success on the book and journal sides, thanks to the OBC and OACIP. Yet *mediastudies.press* remains a volunteer effort. We pay our (superb) copy editor, translators, and (the rare) designer fairly. But the core operational labor of producing books and running the organisation is unremunerated. This is not a point of principle, even though arguments for the virtues of volunteer labor in scholar-led publishing have some appeal. It is really about resources: we have to pay our memberships, software costs, and the copy editing, to keep the proverbial lights on. Covering those and related costs leaves almost nothing to spare, with the result that the other work, conducted by Park and I, remains donated.

That arrangement is probably not sustainable – not for *mediastudies.press*, nor for other once and future scholar-led initiatives. In my own case, I have stepped down from a tenured academic post in part to win time for the press. Even so, however, I have had to prioritise a pair of paid initiatives, leaving me in a similar place: without enough time leftover to move books through production.

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The fact is that the income generated by the Open Book Collective, while indispensable, is not yet enough to cover modest-rate, part-time pay for the director and associate director. That may change: the OBC is brand-new, and still rolling out its outreach to libraries and other funders. The effort has already delivered the basic proof, that mission-aligned collective funding can work in practice.

One obvious question is whether the funding model can scale. It is not the right question though, since of course the model can scale – the very idea is predicated on bundling, vetting, and a fiscal hub. A mission-aligned funding exchange is a practical mechanism for connecting nonprofit funders with nonprofit publishers, a community-governed coordination tool for a system with many participants.

The real question is political will. If the scholarly publishing system is hurtling toward open access, who will pay for it? There are two choices, in effect: authors or direct support for publishing. Hinging authorship on the ability to pay is a bald injustice. If we are committed to furnishing open access for readers and authors alike, we need to push for what is the only fair way forward: collective funding. Recent developments in Europe and Latin America furnish a glint of promise for an APC-free future. The big commercial publishers will, however, fight to retain their obscene OA profits. The choice of which path to take will, ultimately, fall to universities, scholars, and the public who fund both. In that respect *mediastudies.press* is a political statement. Together with its scholar-led peers, we hope to demonstrate, in miniature, that a different publishing world is possible.

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Notes

- [1] See e.g. Pooley 2015, 2016.
- [2] The big five for-profit firms are: Elsevier (parent: RELX Group), Springer Nature (parent: Holtzbrinck), Taylor & Francis (parent: Informa), Wiley, and SAGE. See Larivière & Haustein & Mongeon 2015 for an overview of the five publishers' rapid capture of most of the scholarly publishing market.
- [3] Chan et al 2002. See Suber 2011.
- [4] BioMed Central 2001.
- [5] Public Library of Science 2004.
- [6] Pooley 2019.
- [7] Pooley 2021.
- [8] ScholarLed 2018. See Barnes 2018. For a particularly lucid and detailed case study of scholar-led book publishing, see Joy & Van Gergen Oei 2023.
- [9] For more on the decision to switch to PubPub, see Pooley 2022. Disclosure: since autumn 2023, I have served as a Fellow at Knowledge Futures, helping to support the next major version of PubPub.
- [10] mediastudies.press 2019
- [11] The founding board members were myself, David W. Park, John L. Sullivan, Peter Simonson, and Tim Elfenbein. In 2023 we welcomed Cheryll Ruth Soriano and Juliette De Maeyer, with Sullivan cycling off the board.
- [12] Peter Simonson, a co-editor of *History of Media Studies*, has spearheaded the journal's commitment to geographic and other kinds of diversity, particularly in regards to Spanish-language and Latin American outreach.
- [13] Park & Pooley & Simonson 2022.

- [14] Rosen et al 2022.
- [15] The initiative is Community-led Open Publication Infrastructures for Monographs (COPIM), funded by the Arcadia Fund and Research England. See Barnes 2019.
- [16] Synder & Fathallah 2023.
- [17] Pooley 2021.
- [18] Russell 1905, p. 479.
- [19] See Adema & Moore 2021.
- [20] Zaworsky 2013.