



Yes, Scholar-Publishers Can Make Common Cause After All

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Last spring, I began work with the open access advocacy group, [Libraria](#), as a Community Convener to help organize a mutual aid network amongst a group of open access publications in anthropology and adjacent fields. [Cooperate for Open](#) (or C4O, as this network is affectionately known), is motivated by the idea that there is a wide variety of open access models suitable for different contexts and scales. In the case of C4O the focus is on small, scholar-led, open access publications that consistently find themselves — sometimes deliberately — on the



margins of scholarly publishing. I wrote [a piece for Allegra Lab](#) about the rationale behind the project when I began this contract, wondering whether (and hoping that) scholar-publishers could make common cause. Now, as my work winds down, it seems as good a time as any to offer my answer to that question.

VALUES-LED PUBLISHING

It's not an easy thing to build a community of practice, especially in this corner of the scholarly publishing community. The open access publications that are the focus of C4O, often referred to as [scholar-led](#), community-driven, and increasingly, [Diamond OA](#), are “[labors of love](#)”. They are often run on shoestring budgets, relying mostly on voluntary labor and the support of friendly librarians (who sometimes provide ongoing platform and technical assistance) to get by.

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Many of them face precarious futures. What binds them together, however, is a set of shared values. For instance, they are deeply committed to retaining control over their publications and not handing them over to “professional” publishers. In light of the [HAU scandal](#), they are also committed to supporting ethical and fair labor practices. And while they aren't opposed to growing bigger in an organic way, they are often happy to remain small rather than heed the pressure to scale up in order to be taken seriously. In many ways, the long-term goal of this group of publications is not only to put scholarly publishing back into the hands of scholars, but also to challenge the entire process of research assessment with its current focus on prestige and metrics.

These values are what attracted me to the Community Convener position. Who wouldn't want to support the scholar-publisher David against the commercial publisher Goliath? And so we started to build this community from a place of



strength, with a few people who were vocal in their support of scholar-led publishing. We met together over Zoom a few times to reiterate both our shared values and struggles, and then we began to imagine what collective efforts might help ease the burdens we were carrying. We gradually extended the invitation to include other relevant Diamond OA publications, trying to ensure that everyone was on a similar (if not exactly the same) page. We launched a C4O instance on [Mattermost](#) (an open source alternative to Slack), so that journal editors could share knowledge directly with one another. We invited experts from [funders](#), [infrastructure providers](#), [collective funding experiments](#), and sister networks like [Scholar-led PLUS](#) to address the group. In short, we created the beginnings of a social and communicative infrastructure to make knowledge-sharing easier, and then leveraged it to surface the potential for shared undertakings that could, in turn, cement this new community's identity.

So who exactly is C4O, you might ask? It's a community that currently comprises 35+ individuals representing 26 publications in 8 countries and at least 7 different disciplines across the humanities and social sciences. The most-represented field is anthropology, but we also have publications from science and technology studies, geography, sociology, environmental studies, media studies, and gender studies. Some are the official publications of scholarly societies (e.g., [Cultural Anthropology](#), [Anthropologica](#), and [Engaging Science and Technology Studies](#)). Some are experimental and public-facing (e.g. [Allegra Lab](#) itself and [Otherwise Magazine](#)). Others are the product of a more niche vision of scholarly community (e.g., [Made in China](#), [Commoning Ethnography](#), and [Nature/Culture](#)), while still others work within a more traditional scholarly journal format.

WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO MAKE



COMMON CAUSE?

Have we been successful in building a community of practice? Is it even possible to build a community of practice in six months? Well, if you consider that the [feasibility study](#) informing this project indicated that ties between these publications were weak or nonexistent to begin with, then we have most definitely made progress. Nearly 80% of the publications involved reported feeling a sense of connection to a broader community in a recent survey. While this may not yet be as strong an attachment as we would like, it marks a significant change and creates a base for future growth. As a group, we also discussed the landmark [Action Plan for Diamond Open Access](#) and agreed to endorse it, recognizing that C4O represents a unique approach to capacity building that others might benefit from.

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One of the goals of this group is to increase the visibility of its members. And there are two ideas that emerged from discussions over the last six months that I hope will form the basis of a next phase of community building. The first, and most compelling, is to use the slow food movement as a model to think about an [alternative certification process](#) for small, values-led, Diamond OA publications. While this idea is in its infancy, if it comes to fruition, there is real potential for it to become an important tool for signaling to libraries and funders the value of supporting this kind of publishing. It may also provide a blueprint of sorts for future community mobilization and participation. The second hinges on the development of a shared platform or portal — a way to promote member publications and curate their content for various audiences. This isn't a new idea, of course. Other scholar-led publishing organizations are [doing similar things](#). But then who wants to reinvent the wheel? A key goal for this group is to partner with the right organizations so that we increase visibility and discoverability without



compromising independence and autonomy: what better way than to do so with [like-minded champions](#) of a values-led approach to publishing?

These successes — as significant as they are — have been blunted a bit by the challenges faced along the way. Time — one of the most valuable resources in this community — is in especially short supply. Most editors are already overextended publishing their journals, and the idea of getting involved with another collective — even one that could eventually make their lives easier — can feel overwhelming. While all of the editors involved in this community indicated that C4O was an important and valuable initiative, many found it difficult to carve out the time to devote to making it work. Organizing meetings across many different time zones was also a challenge, even with synchronous and asynchronous options. Participation was often uneven and erratic, reflecting the reality of people's very busy lives, and ongoing coordination was required to harness that participation as effectively as possible. Finally, there is a constant war of attrition in the Diamond OA sector. Passion projects emerge one day only to disappear when the scholars who launched them move on to other things. Some struggle to get by financially. Others never really get off the ground or can't meet ongoing publishing schedules. Yet C4O is not only a place to help these more precarious publications survive longer; it may also be an important support in preserving them for future audiences if and when they wind down.

I started this contract as a relative newbie to open access publishing. I have learned a lot, even if much of it — the challenges of tight budgets, labors of love, and limited resources — was already familiar to me as a university press editor. I end this contract feeling both overwhelmed by the challenge ahead, and inspired by this group and their dogged determination to make common cause. Because, despite the challenges involved, this group *has* made common cause with the potential to build even deeper connections in the future. It requires a big vision to turn away from the power of prestige in favor of a more cooperative, collegial, and caring scholarly publishing system. It also requires a lot of hard work. I have no doubt that if that vision is realized in the future — even just part of it — we will have the supportive and creative minds behind C4O and Libraria to thank for



it.

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