

The Influence of Open Access on Monograph Sales

The experience at Amsterdam University Press

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The hybrid model of Amsterdam University Press (AUP) combines monograph sales with Open Access publishing. This paper investigates the effects of Open Access publishing on the sales of monographs, taking into account the influence of: commercial potential; frontlist and backlist; and language. The data set contains sales figures of 513 books, spread over 36 months: 2010 to 2012. Over 70 per cent of those books are published on Open Access and are distributed through the OAPEN Library. Each influence is relevant, which makes it harder to single out the effects of Open Access. The large difference between frontlist sales figures and those of the backlist leads to a separate

analysis. The frontlist sales are affected by a combination of commercial potential and language; Open Access publishing has no effect in this situation. For the backlist, Open Access publishing is a significant influence on sales only in the subset of books whose print run is between one and 2000. No significant effect on books with a print run of zero, or on books with a print run between 2001 and 3000, could be measured. The hybrid model does not lead to more sales of monographs available on Open Access, and the loss of sales is negligible. The data suggest that a hybrid model is not an option to improve the sustainability of monograph publishing.

Keywords: monographs, Open Access publishing, business models

Introduction

For years, decreasing sales have threatened the sustainability of monograph publishing and this has led to a search for alternative models. Most of these proposed models are hybrid: they contain an Open Access component combined with selling other versions of the book. In this paper, the experiences of Amsterdam University Press (AUP) in using a hybrid model are analysed by looking at the effect of Open Access publishing on monograph sales. However, several other influences may also affect sales, and these will be taken into account as well. The goal is to find what effect making books freely available online has on sales. To achieve this, I shall apply statistical methods to the sales data of 513 books from a period of three years.

The economic problems concerning monographs have been discussed by Wasserman and Thompson. Wasserman (1998) discusses the costs of publishing monographs and the dramatic effects of declining library sales. Thompson (2005) extensively reviews the challenges—including financial challenges—facing monograph publishing.

Others look at the possibilities of digital publishing in an Open Access model. Greco and Wharton (2008) conclude that university presses cannot survive on a 'print-only' business model and should consider Open Access publishing. Steele (2008) draws more or less the same conclusion and describes the Open Access model as 'a viable alternative when placed within institutional settings'. Houghton et al. (2009) discuss the costs of scholarly publishing—including the costs of monographs—and conclude that Open Access publishing is beneficial for society. Withey et al. (2011) acknowledge a trend towards more Open Access publishing, but stress the need for sustainable business models. Cross urges academic libraries to support small academic publishers by purchasing their monographs (Cross, 2011). Pinter (2012) also discusses the financial perils of publishing monographs and proposes a solution in which a consortium of libraries fund an Open Access version of a title, enabling the publisher to sell enhanced digital or paper versions of the book.

Recently, Ferwerda (2014) listed the current business

models for Open Access and monographs, ranging from a hybrid publication model to crowd-funding. Jackson (2014)—a publisher at Oxford University Press—describes the current lack of demand for a publishing model in which all costs are met before publication. At this moment, there is no consensus regarding a 'proven' business model.

Some authors also try to find evidence of whether free digital versions of a book have an effect on sales. Hilton and Wiley (2011) conclude that a correlation exists between a free ebook and increased print sales. Their research used an experimental group of eight books and a control group of six books, both fiction and non-fiction. Snijder (2010) set up an experiment on monographs, using three experimental groups of 100 titles each and a control group of 100 titles. One result was that making a book freely available did not affect the number of copies sold. Based on the same principles, the Dutch-based OAPEN Foundation set up a two-year experiment: OAPEN-NL. During that period, 50 books were published on Open Access and also as a paper monograph. Several aspects—sales among them—were monitored and compared with a control group of comparable titles published in the traditional way. The results were similar to Snijder's results: the number of copies sold was not affected by publishing on Open Access (Ferwerda et al., 2013). In the UK, JISC set up an experiment called OAPEN-UK. Here, 29 'matched pairs' of monographs are compared: one title in each pair is made available on Open Access while no changes are made to the other's publication model (Collins and Milloy, 2012).

This paper does not follow the same controlled arrangement used by Snijder (2010) or the OAPEN-NL experiment. Instead of investigating carefully balanced data sets, I use all titles published under one imprint published by AUP. Whereas the experiment of 2010 used data selected over nine months of the year 2009, here the time frame is much larger: 36 months, the years 2010 to 2012.

Amsterdam University Press is an academic publisher—owned by the University of Amsterdam—that publishes monographs and journals, mostly in the field of humanities and social sciences (AUP, 2012). The Press has gained extensive experience with Open Access publishing. The Open Access monographs are always made available via a hybrid model in which the print version