COPIM •

Collective Governance: an Update from The Open Book Collective Work Package

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Published on: Oct 11, 2021

DOI: 10.21428/785a6451.f47c5c51

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How should a collective be governed? This was the question that punctum books' Director Eileen Joy and I took the lead in addressing, in collaboration with our COPIM colleagues and a range of workshop participants. The terms of the question seem almost contradictory: a 'collective' implies equity, collegiality, co-operation and a lack of organized hierarchy, whilst 'governed' suggests top-down management structures, or the imposition of rules and regulations by a select group over a larger majority. Obviously, the latter model would not be in line with the values of a project we are calling the Open Book Collective – [i.e., a consortium that brings together publishers, librarians and other stakeholders in the future of open access monographs via a platform that catalogues, distributes and sustains OA books](#) – yet at the same time, we needed to find a way that the different groups of stakeholders could be effectively organized to work together and get the most out of the platform in a mutually beneficial arrangement. For the purposes of the platform we are building, that means publishers, librarians, scholars, researchers, universities, infrastructure providers, authors, readers and more. The platform needs to respond to a wide range of interests, needs and requirements, even if all of us were committed to the overarching values of sustainable Open Access publishing for monographs.

In close collaboration with our colleagues in [Work Package 4](#), who are looking at governance models and structures for the many parts of COPIM, we held a series of workshops, planning meetings and brainstorming sessions between June 2020 and July 2021, inviting representatives from the ScholarLed publishing group, librarians, DOAB, JISC, and other researchers. COPIM thanks the members of the Humanities Commons Working Group for their helpful contributions to the workshops. In the first of these, we took a broad perspective on governance issues, discussing the values and ethos that should underlie the whole of COPIM 's governance procedures. We explored questions of accountability and looked at a range of models for how we could enable equitable, horizontal relationships in scholarly communication. We explored different models and proposals for governing collaborative community-based projects of various scales, especially those associated with books and publishing. We were particularly concerned with how the values of the projects were embodied in their governance procedures at a practical level.

We came to summarize the values that we wanted to embody as including:

- **Bibliophilia** (love and care for books)

- **Remaining Community-led:** driven by the community of communities dedicated to public - knowledge and the love of the book. We do not want the collective of platform to be co-optable for profit or by entities at odds with our values.
- **Dedication to Open and public knowledge** (inclusive, open source, open access, open ways of working)
- **Dedication to DEI** (diversity, equity and inclusion): we are committed to serving diverse stakeholders without regard to gender, race, nationality, disability, sexuality, institutional status, and to ensuring fair representation at governance level.
- **Scaling Small** (our focus is on small to medium OA publishers, and supporting them in developing their OA programs)
- **Anti-competitive:** we believe the future of OA monograph publishing will be better served by collaboration and a diversity of models, not competition or monopolies
- **Non-hierarchical**

Then we began discussing how these values could be implemented at the level of governance. For instance, our regulations or principles must include protections against incorporation: neither the OBC platform, nor COPIM itself, should be co-optable for profit by a larger entity. Our projects should be governed by representatives from a broad cross-section of stakeholders; and we must work towards the recognition of potential barriers to participation and avoiding them in the structures we create.

Now we had certain principles in place, we needed to get more concrete about how these would be enacted in governance structures. So, in workshops two and three, we started to talk more explicitly about the elements of COPIM and the OBC that needed ‘governing’ in some sense, and the models by which that could work. In the second workshop specifically, we talked about who precisely the actors or participants in our community would be – certainly people, in the form of librarians and publishers, readers and writers – but also nonhuman actors like institutions and digital infrastructures. Technology itself is never neutral: the way we program sites, the way users are directed to move across platforms, to interact with the network, is a series of ideological choices that we wanted to direct in line with the values noted above.

By the third workshop, we were ready to discuss which structure(s) or mixture of structures would fit COPIM or its various elements best and why, also in relation to the mission, values we’d articulated. We looked at a range of co-operative and hierarchical models and how they were utilized in organizations like OPERAS, ArXiv, and D-Space. Those of us in Work Package 2 were consistently thinking about this from the perspective of the OBC platform specifically, having come to the conclusion that we needed to think

about this as a distinct element of COPIM which would need its own structure of governance under the umbrella of the larger project. In particular, we needed to establish precisely what the ‘Collective’ in the term Open Book Collective was comprised of.

Ideologically, it seemed fitting to respond ‘everyone with an interest in OA’, but pragmatically and for reasons of legal integration, that would be difficult. Firstly, not everybody wants to be integrated into a collective. Whilst librarians and publishers might be equally committed to the value of sustainable OA monographs, each has specific needs and mandates that might at times conflict. Librarians need to fulfil the needs of their institution, often on limited and shrinking budgets. Not-for-profit publishers at the very least need to sustain themselves. Everybody is working under time pressure, with multiple professional, personal and financial commitments, which the pandemic has only exacerbated. It can be uncomfortable to admit that a cozy term like ‘community’ might not always be the most applicable for a collection of stakeholders who ultimately share the same fundamental beliefs about the equitable distribution of knowledge and a commitment to OA publishing. But that is the reality we must confront in order to govern fairly and effectively. Moreover, publishers and infrastructure providers will have responsibilities to the collective above and beyond those of subscribers: they will have an obligation for a degree of output that needs to be recognised as a separate legal condition.

Participants were in agreement that an entirely open, or flat model of governance wouldn’t work: whilst maintaining polycentrism, there would ultimately have to be a ‘soft’ hierarchical element in order to enable decision-making. Equally, not every participant would want or have time to be involved in governing the platform. Eileen Joy of punctum books has kindly created this indicative diagram for how governance of the OBC platform might work:

Thus, the collective itself is comprised of relatively self-governing circles or publishers, publishing collectives, and infrastructure providers. Libraries are also part of the collective, though they do not have the responsibility for ‘output’ that the producers have. Above the collective sits the administrative committee, above which sits a board of trustees. Users interface with the collective and the committee via the web platform through a management team.

Clearly, a lot remains to be answered here, notably questions of eligibility, election and accountability. Questions we have considered, that remain under discussion, include:

- Who is eligible to be part of the platform in the first place? We were in agreement that, in accordance with open values, any user should be able to *use* the platform, to browse or gather information. But who is eligible to be part of the collective? Must they be contributing, in the form of content (for publishers) or revenue (for librarians/institutions)?
- What publishers or other books-focused OA initiatives are eligible to join the OBC, and what do we require of them? We are working on a series of requirements for signup, informed by our colleagues at related projects like DOAB and OAPEN.
- Who is eligible to serve on the administrative committee and how are they elected?
- How do we ensure diversity within and accountability of the committee?

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Fig. 1: Diagram indicating the different elements of the OBC platform’s governance model.

- How precisely are different institutions and organizations represented at committee level? What if there is more appetite to govern from one group of stakeholders from another?
- What procedures do the distinct groupings (indicated by the smaller circles above) follow within themselves – e.g., it seems sensible that the group of publishers within the collective meet every so often and then feed their notes or issues up to administration, but how is fairness ensured within that structure?
- Upon ‘joining’ the collective, what is the relationship of an individual to their institution? How far does a librarian represent or ‘speak for’ a university, or indeed the library itself?

Clearly, there is much still to be decided. But the efforts and co-operation demonstrated at the workshops so far bode extremely well for the future. ‘Governance of a collective’ is a daunting proposition: conflict and collision of needs is inevitable, even when values align. But the goodwill and hard work of participants so far, even in this most difficult of years, leaves us optimistic that the platform and collective are progressing towards a system that will genuinely work to sustain OA books with equity.

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Header image: Photo by [Hannah Busing](#) on Unsplash