

# From mission to market: a case study and analysis of the commercialisation of institutional publishing

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## Abstract

The recent partial acquisition of a university press by Taylor and Francis provoked strong reaction from some quarters and walkouts by academic editors at the press. This case, however, fits into a much broader set of interrelated questions about the role, the marketable 'brand', and the very identity of the university press in the 21st Century. In this article, we situate the case of this acquisition in these wider debates around university governance, the usefulness of the 'commercial' vs 'non-profit' dichotomy, the flow of revenue from libraries to publishers, and the lack of awareness by many researchers around their rights as authors. We also elucidate the case for good, participatory governance and more transparency around governance as safeguards for the longevity, efficacy, and reputation of institutional publishing.

## Keywords

Open access, institutional publishing, community-led, commercialisation, mergers, acquisitions

## Introduction

On 6 June 2025, a flurry of screenshots began to be shared on Bluesky and elsewhere: authors at Amsterdam University Press (AUP) found themselves being inducted into the Taylor and Francis (T&F) ‘family’ with no explanation and little context.<sup>1</sup> The immediate, but ultimately incorrect, assumption was that AUP had been bought wholesale by T&F, a situation that was unwelcome news to most who reacted to it publicly. It would also have had difficult implications for the Copim-led, library-funded Opening the Future (n.d.) programme at Central European University Press (CEU Press), since CEU Press themselves entered into a long-term partnership with AUP in mid-2024.

Copim (2025) is a community (to which the authors of this article belong) of scholars, open access (OA) publishers, librarians, open infrastructure providers, and more. We are committed to building open, non-commercial, and decentralised models and infrastructure to support the growth of community-led open access book publishing, run for and governed by scholars and readers, and not beholden to the interests of shareholders. One of the models that Copim has developed is Opening the Future, a mechanism to fund OA books without charging authors by utilising library subscriptions to curated packages of a partner press’ closed-access backlist to fund OA frontlist titles. It works with small, scholarly publishers (currently mainly university presses) who are trying to incrementally flip from traditional, sales-based business models to OA. Since 2020, Copim has worked with CEU Press to implement the Opening the Future (OtF) model at the press, with the result that c.60 new OA titles have been funded at CEU Press to date, without charging authors.

Copim is fundamentally opposed to the dominance of scholarly publishing by monolithic commercial conglomerates such as T&F, for whom publishing is primarily a profit-making enterprise. It would therefore have been deeply problematic for us if a press with which we had been working had been acquired by T&F. It was not until 12 June 2025 that a statement on the deal was released by AUP (2025) which explained that, while their English language book list had been sold to T&F, AUP would remain as a separate entity comprising the Dutch AUP books and journals. CEU Press were also left out of the T&F deal.

For the Copim team behind Opening the Future, the immediate reaction was one of relief, but the situation remains troubling to the wider Copim community, raising significant questions for us and, we hope, for others about the susceptibility of university publishing to commercial acquisition. Moreover, the increasing entanglement between the academy and market forces risks compounding existing political and practical issues for the broader OA ecosystem and its bibliodiversity (Adema et al. 2024).

The chain of institutional decisions made to enable AUP to be privately acquired before ultimately becoming part-acquired by a conglomerate publisher raise important questions about the role of universities as stewards of their academic communities and custodians of their collective work. As Joy and van Gerven Oei state, university presses make “claims on the exclusivity of knowledge production within established academic institutions [...] implying a strict adherence to the same precepts of property and patriarchy that underpin the “neoliberal” regime”. (2024) This is particularly significant in the context of an institutional press being appropriated by private interests. Following the acquisition, the role played by scholarly decisions and reputations, the implications for the

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<sup>1</sup> See for example: <https://bsky.app/profile/sarahabendall.bsky.social/post/3lqwp3zzfa22u>, <https://bsky.app/profile/tinahonjo.bsky.social/post/3lr5vek4ink2p>, <https://bsky.app/profile/vinzenzhediger.bsky.social/post/3lqwmj5ic5c2o>, <https://bsky.app/profile/guynes.bsky.social/post/3lqwypew4c2e>

economic sustainability of institutional publishing, and the significance that both readers and scholars attach to “academy owned” publishing (McReady, n.d.) have all been brought into focus.

As is discussed below, the academy has had a significant role in knowledge production, publishing, and dissemination for centuries. However, this has been by no means a monopoly. These roles have also been undertaken by a range of other individuals, communities, organisations, and institutions. In the context of contemporary OA publishing, the political and practical roles of and for scholar-led publishing (as distinct from university publishing) are particularly significant. In light of the Stockholm Declaration’s drive for academia to “resume control of publishing” (Sabel and Larhammar 2025), we should ask what that actually means. These broader contexts and critiques surrounding the contemporary university, “with its implicitly colonialist, patriarchal, and heteronormative ideals of enlightenment humanism” (Kiesewetter 2020) ask us to more critically consider Eve’s (2025) question raised in the immediate aftermath of AUP’s acquisition: ‘What is a university press?’

### What is the ‘brand’ of a university press?

Institutional publishing is a core practice of scholarly publishing, and scholarly publishing in the UK and elsewhere is historically linked to universities and other scholarly societies. One of the very earliest journals was the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London*, first published in 1665, and the relationships between societies and institutions have evolved over time (Atkinson, 1998). The case of Cambridge University Press, the oldest such press to be founded (in 1534) is illuminating. It was given ‘privileged press’ (Cross and Livingstone 1997) status very early, along with Oxford University Press in 1636. This status gave them the right to print certain important, and, at the time of the Reformation, highly inflammatory texts such as the Bible and prayer books<sup>2</sup> – an early signifier of trust in the ‘brand’ of a university to disseminate ‘correct’ knowledge. This both marked their existing prestige and, over time, bolstered it. This relationship between power, trust, and the institutional ‘brand’ arguably predates even the printing press, if we consider the scholarship and dissemination of work by monks, at abbeys and monasteries well-regarded for their scholarship, hand-writing, and copying manuscripts.

University presses (UPs) are a powerful brand. In the highly competitive market of scholarly publishing, part of a university press’ brand, which can be hard for other types of press to replicate, comes from their association with a widely esteemed institution that is often ‘public’ and in some way detached from mundane and temporal concerns of a ‘business’. It is easy to assume (however unconsciously) that a press in an ivory tower should stand above the cutthroat world of mergers and acquisitions, of stock markets and diversified asset portfolios, and that it should care for nothing so much as integrity and credibility, the dissemination of knowledge to improve our world. Mandy Hill (2024), of Cambridge University Press, stated at the Association of Learned and Professional Society

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<sup>2</sup> The publishing of the Bible caused the press to be in sustained tensions with the London Stationers who believed they held a monopoly on Bible printing. Cambridge University Press relied on their charter’s inclusion of their remit to print “all manner of books” (*omnimodos libros*) and were thus able to print the Bible, beginning with the Geneva Bible, and continuing with the Authorised Version, the Revised Version, the New English Bible and the Revised English Bible. See Roberts, SC (1921). *A history of the Cambridge University Press 1521-1921*. Cambridge, U. P.; Baillie, WM (1971). *The printing of privileged books at Cambridge 1631-1634. Transactions of the Cambridge Bibliographical Society*, 5(3), 155-166.

Publishers Redux Conference 2024 that, “commercial publishers publish to make money. University Presses make money in order to publish”.

This appears consistent with what Moore (2025a) notes, insofar as “[t]he university press was originally conceived as an important part of the university’s mission, publishing works with little expectation of a return on investment.” However, aggressive market developments have radically impacted university publishing, “forcing presses to rely increasingly on market returns from their publishing programmes. This means that presses now consider the economic potential of a manuscript, rather than simply its scholarly potential, leading them to prioritise certain fashionable and financially viable proposals at the expense of others” (Moore 2025a), and where this tactic is unsuccessful, it can leave presses in a vulnerable situation.

In the last eighteen years or so, we have also seen the rise of a new wave of institutional publishing activity focused on open access (Adema and Stone 2017). This is perhaps best exemplified by the recent formation of associations of such presses, including the Open Institutional Publishing Association (OIPA) in the UK, the Irish Open Access Publishers (IOAP), the Netherlands University Presses (NUPs), and AG Universitätsverlage in Germany, Austria, and German-speaking regions of Switzerland and Italy. These new presses tend to be smaller than their more established counterparts, sometimes library-led, and without the established reputations that older university presses possess both within and outside their institutions. They are often explicitly opposed to profit-driven approaches to scholarly publishing. They benefit from the ‘brand’ of their parent institution while also attempting to carve out their own names within the institutional press landscape, and grapple not only with the precarity of being relatively young presses, but also of establishing workable models for open access publishing, all of which create their own vulnerabilities.

Series editors at AUP, in their resignation letter of 9 July 2025, argued that while the press had been sold in 2019, for many years subsequently it had “continued to operate like a university press, i.e. a publishing venture committed to fostering research and exchange in a global scholarly community rather than motivated by profit.” (Rogers et al. 2025). These assumptions may well hold true at many UPs, but there are other, market-led factors at play too that force us to question their universality.

However intangible, the university press brand is a highly valuable asset, and in the context of an aggressive publishing market, this makes UPs appealing to commercial publishers that wish to benefit from these assets.<sup>3</sup>

### [A case study: Amsterdam University Press and Taylor & Francis](#)

So what happens when a purchaser recognises the value of this brand in a commercial market, and when a university chooses to sell the rights to use its name?

AUP already provided us with an answer to this question in 2019, six years prior to the T&F deal, when it was sold (Geltner 2019) by the University of Amsterdam (UvA) into private hands along with

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<sup>3</sup> Research culture and research assessment, of which the Research Excellence Framework (REF) is a major component in the UK. These factors have the capacity to shape the ways in which ‘prestige’ operates in academic publishing, but that is a topic beyond the scope of this paper. We would welcome more published research on the impact of research culture and assessment on the brand identity of (institutional) publishers.

the university-licensed branding rights, maintaining the scholarly prestige that was presumably at least part of the value of the purchase. At that time, as Geltner emphasises, there was very little public reaction at all, either from academics or from organisations to which AUP belonged, where membership is tied to being a university press, a non-profit publisher, or other criteria that this purchase may have violated. These organisations included Project MUSE, the Association of University Presses, and the Association of European University Presses.<sup>4</sup>

The university press was no longer owned, governed, or overseen by the university at all – but scarcely anybody seemed to notice.

According to an announcement at the time (Universiteit van Amsterdam 2019), AUP was sold in 2019 to an individual – Jan-Peter Wissink – who was previously the press director when AUP was still owned by UvA Ventures, a holding company of the university. According to a fact sheet about this company (UvA 2018), it was established in 1992 to “consolidate **commercially oriented activities that fall outside, but are nonetheless related to, the university's core responsibilities** within an organisation governed by private law. **This created an explicitly separate entity** vis-à-vis education and research so as to exclude any possibility of confusion with, or improper use, of public funds.” (Emphasis ours). The UvA is the sole shareholder of UvA Ventures, and according to an email from the UvA Ventures director Peter Krijnsen to Guy Geltner dated 13 August 2019, UvA Ventures chose to sell the press because: “despite diverse attempts, the UvA’s seasoned aficionados ‘did not succeed in turning AUP into a profitable company’” (Geltner 2019).

A few points are worth making here. The mere fact of a press being privately owned is not evidence of rapacious commercial intent, just as non-profit status is likewise no guarantee of virtue. “Not-for-profit is, of course, a tax status, not a moral statement” as Eve (2025) has noted. It is worth noting that many universities have embedded ‘commercial’ units that handle some aspects of university business, such as the aforementioned UvA Ventures, or Central European University’s own CEU Educational-Service Non-profit LLC, within which the press and other services sit. It is also worth noting that universities themselves (as well as their presses) can occupy many points along the sliding scale from ‘public’ to ‘private’ – and that neither polarity necessarily has a bearing on the ‘commercialisation’ of the press. There are many private universities, such as the University of Buckingham in the UK (where these institutions are rare), Harvard University in the US (where private universities are relatively common), or the University of Europe for Applied Sciences in Germany (where some private universities can also be found).

It is also worth bearing in mind that within different jurisdictions, a non-profit tax status may be more or less available to institutional or non-profit publishers, and have implications for scholars and institutions. For example, non-profits in Germany have stringent legislative rules (Act on Limited Liability Companies 2023) about surplus retention which can make it a difficult option for sustainable publishing. In Australia, ANU Press, the country’s oldest OA university press, is recognised by the Department of Industry (ANU, n.d.) as a commercial publisher in order to comply with national rules around the allocation of Research Support Program funds, per the Higher Education Research Data

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<sup>4</sup> At the time of writing, Amsterdam University Press remains a member of all of these organisations. We have also not seen any public reaction from these organisations to the T&F deal.

Collection (HERDC) specifications (n.d.). Academic book publishing, unlike journal publishing, is also more difficult to make large profits from (if we exclude textbooks).<sup>5</sup>

All of which is to reiterate, with more detail, that not-for-profit is a tax status and not a moral statement. There are broader conversations to be had about the commercialisation of universities and/or some of their functions, but this is outside the purview of this article. Setting up 'public/state' and 'private/commercial' as opposites could easily result in endless pages of debate in itself – but in many ways, for the purpose of this discussion, it is a red herring. Regardless of the sums involved, and regardless of some of the complexities around the legal status of (parts of) universities both in the UK and elsewhere, as Geltner's post (2019) makes clear, there are two key issues at stake. These are: 1) values: what are the core values of the press? and 2) control: who has control of the press's operations, its mission and its future direction?

If a press is owned by the university, authors and readers might be forgiven for assuming that the press' values will also be those of the university, i.e. the pursuit and dissemination of rigorous scholarly knowledge. Whether those are still the driving principles of the university today is an important related topic, and one that "is specifically important under the prospect of an ongoing neoliberalisation of academia in general, and academic writing and (OA) publishing in particular" (Kiesewetter 2020). It might also be assumed that there are ways to lobby the university regarding the direction of the press – particularly if you are a member of that university – and that the university has ultimate control or oversight of what its press does. However, a university press might not be governed as closely by its parent institution as this supposes, with leadership often delegated to senior management teams within and without the press who set its values and direction. Financially, it might be thought that surplus revenue will be invested back into the press. However, some of the 'privileged presses' discussed above, and others, pass a significant proportion of their revenue to their parent institution for its broader institutional operations, presumably in line with its values, constitution, and orders of association. This means that the monies accrued from the activities of such prestigious institutional publishers *may* not be used for further publishing-related activities, but rather to support their parent institution.<sup>6</sup>

Once a press falls into commercial hands – even if the purchaser intends to be a custodian in line with the original values and mission of the university press – those assumptions no longer hold, and the press is answerable only to its owner(s), who may choose at any time to prioritise other things, including profit generation. However, if the press continues to use the university's name and branding (completely legally in the case of AUP) it may be thought by external observers that those assumed values still hold.

It is important to note how many assumptions are operating here that deserve interrogating. Although we might imagine that a university founds a press to disseminate high-quality research,

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<sup>5</sup> <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.319642> September 19, 2023 'Print Revenue and Open Access Monographs A University Press Study', Ithaka S+R in collaboration with the Association of University Presses notes that there has been a "decline in monograph sales over the last couple of decades, [and] margins on academic books are so thin that publishers may fear that anything that threatens to cannibalize anticipated print sales of a scholarly title [...] is a threat to its viability".

<sup>6</sup> For example, in 2024, Cambridge University Press and Assessment transferred £63.7 million to the University of Cambridge according to their Annual Report: <https://www.cambridge.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/Annual%20Report%202023-24.pdf>

UvA Ventures identifies its subsidiaries as concerned with “commercially oriented activities that fall outside, but are nonetheless related to, the university's core responsibilities”, and once UvA Ventures determined that they would “not succeed in turning AUP into a profitable company” it was jettisoned (UvA 2018). Of course, this may simply be another way of saying ‘the press was failing financially and we did not think we could keep it afloat’ but what we are seeing here is a gradual process of distancing, even before the first sale of AUP: the university owns *UvA Ventures*, which owned AUP, and UvA Ventures has its own mission and governance, with the university as sole shareholder. It is UvA Ventures that eventually decides to sell AUP to a private individual, who finally – to bring the story up to date – partially sells AUP to T&F (which itself is owned by Informa plc), sparking the reactions we noted at the start of this piece. Presses need a stronger role in their own governance to advocate for themselves, rather than their fate being in the hands of a university-created holding company that is primarily concerned with commerce.

Several of AUP’s series editors have resigned in the wake of the deal with T&F, noting in a public statement that:

“None of the authors or series editors, who have been creating value for AUP through unpaid labor, were consulted about the deal between AUP and Informa LTD [sic]. The expertise necessary to create the book lists sold to Informa LTD [sic] is obviously considered to be without value. This lack of valuation also comes as a surprise to our employers, in particular the universities which have supported the creation of the AUP film, media and communication list by allowing us to contribute our time and labor without remuneration.” (Rogers et al 2025)

This echoes Geltner (2019), in which he argues:

“the UvA never specifically disclosed the reasons why tax-paid scholarship and the labor of numerous staff members turn at the stroke of a pen into someone else’s private property, even if contributors originally signed up to publish, review, edit and indeed solicit scholarly texts on behalf of an ostensibly public press. Some of these “content creators” may not care that they are literally volunteering to produce wealth for a private company that is unaccountable to them, and which may fold or be sold to the highest bidder, with no guarantee that fields it supports today will be continued tomorrow... Others, like me, very much do care, not least in light of the destructive force with which private publishers (now increasingly selling their wares as data merchants) have hit universities’ depleting research and library budgets. AUP cannot be charged with the latter offenses as yet, but there is now far less to stop it or a future owner from doing so.”

It seems clear that the labour of producing academic research publications is by no means “without value”, but that authors and series editors are investing their labour and their intellectual property into organisations in which they have no say over governance.<sup>7</sup> They may have believed that the ‘university press’ label offered sufficient guarantee of shared values, but as this chain of sales

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<sup>7</sup> This is underlined in a comment from Vinzenz Hediger, one of the editors who has resigned in the wake of the deal, in a recent [Times Higher Education](#) article: ‘If there was a crisis in [AUP’s] business model, they should have called a meeting with the people who have been investing their expertise in AUP to discuss how they can contribute towards a sustainable solution.’ These editors want a meaningful role in the governance of the press, but their intellectual investment was evidently not made with the contractual conditions that would grant them one, and the press itself was not set up with such a governance structure embedded in it.

demonstrates, it did not – exposing the fact that the question ‘what is a university press?’ does not have an obvious nor a settled answer. Some are set up as AUP was, some are charities; some are operationally distant from the university, some are deeply embedded; some make money for the university, some require investment from the university. The ownership structure, the operational setup, the objectives, and the governance are not communicated by the label ‘university press’. Furthermore, the books, the branding, and the name can be subject to private sale (seemingly without professional bodies reacting publicly to send any signal) and finally, as in the case of AUP, we might arrive at the point where university presses – or lists thereof – become imprints of conglomerate publishers, whose primary objective is profit.

Another facet worthy of acknowledgement is that after T&F’s acquisition of the AUP backlist, it soon became apparent that their migration to the Routledge platform had made at least some OA books available in closed access form only. Authors were discovering this and sharing their concerns on social media (Sorg 2025; Gunzelmann 2025). When we reviewed a sample of the books affected we found they had been originally issued under CC BY-NC. At least one book had originally been made OA through payments by funders, according to its author, and was still accessible through options offered by the DOI resolver. OAPEN were continuing to make the full texts openly available, but the DOI resolver did not necessarily include those links, meaning that users would have to be aware of such vital infrastructures and to check them manually. These examples of commercial acquisition of OA works highlight an apparent absence of an ethics of care and hospitality by the acquiring conglomerate publisher in their ongoing responsibilities to the authors, works, licensing, copyright, hosting, and dissemination.

There are many issues with the value and notion of prestige in publishing, including concepts of quality, reputation, artificial scarcity and more, as discussed in more depth in by Barnes (2020). But no matter how problematic, it is still highly prized in scholarly publishing, and the question of whether it can be so easily bought remains to be answered. We would urge that the answer should be a resounding ‘no’. A strong response is warranted from interested parties, such as other university presses and their associations, libraries, and other community groups. There is a high degree of risk in normalising the adoption of university branding by conglomerate publishers, and the conversion of the publishing arm of a higher education institution into merely another imprint and source of AI content ingestion for a publisher. This has severe implications for both the longevity and the reputation of institutional publishing.

### But... so what?

Why does any of this really matter? After all, publishers are bought all the time, in both trade and academic publishing. Indeed, we have recently seen the large, non-profit, institutional publisher Oxford University Press acquire Karger Publishers (OUP 2025). The ‘Big Five’ conglomerates<sup>8</sup> are made up of a bewildering patchwork of imprints that were once independent publishing endeavours, and such large publishers continue to grow and centralise their power in the market through mergers and acquisitions. Anyone involved in academic publishing quickly becomes used to the almost reflexive nature of the question, ‘But will this scale?’, as though centralisation and ever-increasing growth are indeed the overall objectives. If a university finds it is financially prudent or desirable to

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<sup>8</sup> Elsevier, Springer Nature, Wiley, SAGE, and Taylor & Francis make up what are known as the “big five” in academic publishing.

sell its press, and it cannot – or does not want to – continue to run it, then so what? Is not a sale like this ‘just business’?

The dangers of viewing scholarly publishing in these terms have been rehearsed many times (McGuigan and Russell 2008; Brienza 2015; Larivière et al 2015), but it is worth briefly touching on some of them here.

Published academic research is not a fungible product, and libraries (the main purchaser of the published product) cannot easily reject the price of access to this research if it is exorbitantly high. Companies whose primary aim is profit generation are aware of this. In the context of open access agreements, Peter Barr (2023) noted that there is an assumption “that libraries can leverage their long-standing relationships with academic publishers to negotiate ‘Transformative’ agreements”. But Barr goes on to point out that “these relationships are dysfunctional. In reality, what libraries have proved is that they are skilled at finding the funds to pay for ever escalating ransom notes.” (2023) A recent article in Research Professional News (Hogan 2025) also showcased the same issue, quoting Liam Earney, Managing Director at Jisc (a key UK library sector partner who provide managed and brokered products and services), who said that these deals and their economic models were seen as “fundamentally broken” by most universities who engage with them. As the EbookSOS campaign (EbookSOS n.d.) and recent work by Knowledge Rights 21 (Knowledge Rights 21 n.d.) has demonstrated, these problems are not confined to open access deals.

Conglomerate publishers report enormous quarterly and year-end profits, often well over inflation (Butler et al 2023). Many large commercial publishers have floated themselves on the stock market, enshrining their commodification further and bringing shareholders to the fore as the group whose interests must be served. Institutional funds routed to shareholders do not eventually return to the institutional budget lifecycle – that money is lost to universities and their public mission forever. If this is ‘just business’ then librarians and universities seem to be getting poor return on investment.

From the perspective of the author, the growth of AI, and publisher responses to this trend, have heightened questions around whether the research they create is simply ‘content’ to be owned and sold as part of business deals. Authors who have chosen to sign contracts with commercial publishers wherein their work is sold to readers and university libraries for high fees have nonetheless become angry (Dutton 2024) when the same publisher has made a lucrative deal to sell access to their work to AI developers. One type of ‘business’ has become normalised, but the deals ushered in by the AI era throw these rapacious practices into a new light.

Our criticism of the primacy of commercial interests in academic publishing is not an arbitrary purity test – it has serious implications for higher education, as budgets, including those of institutional libraries, are already under intense pressure, and for scholarly publishing as a whole. This corporatisation seems to us to be at odds with many academic communities that scholarly publishers *should* be serving (Jeffrey 2025). Academic research within publicly funded universities is (still, for now) a collaborative endeavour that aims to serve societal needs, not a private activity intended to generate profit for a small group. Within that context, is scholarly knowledge a commodity, an asset to be exploited and extracted from, or a collectively produced resource to be shared as widely as possible?

## Governance and Infrastructure

If university presses are at risk of sale to commercial enterprises, and if this is a future we do not wish to see, then what protections do institutional presses have in place to defend themselves from commercial acquisitions, especially during economic hardships that may lead to them being seen as an operational risk to institutional finances?

Eve's blog post (2025) noted one critical answer to this question that resonates with much of our work in the Copim community: governance, and the importance of *good*, participatory governance. In the case of university presses, it is wider university governance as well as internal governance at the level of the press itself that matters – for all institutional presses are, to one extent or another, subject to the whims of their institutional vision or mission and at the mercy of its trends (be they economic, political, or otherwise). Good governance can offer a measure of security and control over the values of an organisation, so that when a difficult decision has to be made – how do we respond to a financial crisis that affects our press, for example – those with a governing role know that they will have a say.

This is why transparent governance has been a fundamental part of Copim since its inception (COPIM, n.d.) and it has been baked into the infrastructures that we have created. For example, the Open Book Collective (OBC) connects libraries with publishers and infrastructure providers, enabling them to provide financial support, and gives them a meaningful share in OBC's governance (OBC 2025), so that the organisations that invest in the OBC will not find themselves in the position of AUP's resigning series editors, grieved to be subject to commercial deals over which they have had no control. The development of robust governance structures that meaningfully involve members of the university community – including academics and librarians as well as administrators – in the running and future direction of a university press are essential.

Unlike OBC, Opening the Future was founded as a mechanism to be embedded within individual publishers, and not ever intended to become an operational organisation itself. As such, the Copim team that devised and launched the programme with several presses consciously chose not to implement a more strict governance structure, operating instead through signed memorandum of understanding (MoU) agreements while we worked together, on the assumption that Copim would eventually hand the operation of the model over to the publishers themselves and/or to other, values-aligned organisations post-project. That is still the plan and in the case of AUP's partial acquisition by T&F, the MoU would have allowed us to part ways with CEU Press had they been affected, but the episode did feel like a near miss – the AUP series editors who expressed alarm were not the only ones taken by surprise by the T&F development. One positive outcome, however, is that it has accelerated the OtF team's work on devising a set of guiding principles that we will ask participating presses to display publicly, and we are working to create a community of practice (much like the Subscribe to Open Community of Practice (Subscribe to Open n.d.)), whereby we intend that the OtF stakeholder community (including libraries, library organisations, and participating publishers) will together superintend these principles. The Opening the Future Copim team will also weigh up the pros and cons of our approach since 2020 transparently in one of several reports we intend to publish towards the close of our project, in case our experience will be of use and interest to other groups working on collective funding models.

We would also be remiss if we did not highlight the importance of infrastructure in enabling – or constraining – the ability of a press's management or governing body to act. Using commercial

services while being able to extricate yourself from them if desired may be one thing, but dependence on commercial *ecosystems* means that a press is not fully in control of its operations. Yet using proprietary services remains a common practice for many publishers. Migrating to new and open alternatives poses a challenge, with implications for established workflows, which increasingly tethers presses to paying for third-party commercial services. This is why, in our view, open infrastructure is important and offers operational advantages for enhancing sustainability, and opening up important aspects of scholarly publishing, such as bibliographic metadata. Increased usage of, and investment in emerging open infrastructures (which includes financial investment and collaborative development of open source tools) will push these infrastructures towards a tipping point, demonstrating their utility for contemporary scholarly publishing.

### Transparency in – and awareness of – how publishing works

A final key element, the absence of which is evident throughout this discussion, is transparency and awareness about how university presses work: in other words, what their ownership and governance structures are, what their economic models are, and who has a meaningful say in their operations and future direction. As we have tried to emphasise throughout this paper, universities vary in this as in other aspects we have discussed – some presses are already relatively transparent about their organisation, whereas others are not.

Moore has observed that statements of transparency could be a distraction or misdirection from the more substantive aspects of governance in the context of commercial scholarly publishing. He notes that transparency could even be "a substitute for governance" (Moore 2025b). But transparency is nonetheless a keystone of trust and awareness, not least because not all stakeholders have the time or expertise to unpick opaque contractual arrangements. Partial acquisitions, long-term licensing of 'branding', the sale of contracts, and much more – all of these make it difficult for interested parties to know exactly who they are dealing with, and where their intellectual property and/or money is going. We have done our best due diligence to establish the facts of the initial sale of AUP and its subsequent partial sale to T&F, but they should not be so difficult to establish. The vacuum that was initially left for conjecture by the belated statement from AUP clarifying the details of the second sale (not to mention the continuing public silence from T&F) should have been avoided in the first place.

It should also be acknowledged that some of the reaction to these deals reveals a concerning lack of knowledge about how publishing works among authors and series editors. Whether you have the right to be consulted about the sale of a press, or whether you have the right to refuse that your books are included in a deal with a third party, are matters that authors and editors should be clear about before they commit to a relationship with a publisher. These issues are not much discussed in academia. One might argue, with some justice, that this is because academic communities are already overwhelmed by myriad other challenges, and because the field of academic publishing is complex, opaque, and always shifting (Moore 2025c; Fisher 2025). Nonetheless, a lack of knowledge of and engagement with these issues when choosing a publisher and signing a contract leaves researchers vulnerable to the commercial exploitation of their work.

This lack of knowledge and discussion also makes it much easier for these deals and their consequences to slip under the radar, particularly when other signals are absent. The original sale of AUP in 2019 was masked because the university branding was part of the deal, and because communities within scholarly publishing did not react publicly to the change in ownership. Buying

university branding can make it easier for large publishing conglomerates to slip into new identities and new communities easily. As we have explored, the university press ‘brand’ invites trust and implies good faith and a commitment to scholarship, and, for the most part, suggests a non-profit and scholar-focussed approach. That one of the ‘Big Five’ is able to buy into, and trade off, this branding is deeply concerning.

It also ties into concerns about ‘community-washing’ that Copim, among others, has begun to raise (Hopkins et al 2024): commercial companies adopting the rhetoric of non-profit and community-led enterprises as marketing spiel. And from the Copim perspective, there is a noteworthy aspect of the case of AUP, which had, in its earlier iteration, a longstanding and serious commitment to open access. It was a founding member of OAPEN, now a cornerstone of open access infrastructure, with 40% of its entire backlist open access (an impressive feat for a press that began in 1992). AUP remains a member of the Association of University Presses and the Association of European University Presses, and an ongoing participant in Project MUSE despite the latter’s rules around hosting only non-profits. And, due to the link with CEU Press, they are relatively closely linked to Opening the Future as part of the Copim community. For T&F to become so closely imbricated in these relationships is appreciably different and more alarming than if it were to have bought another commercial publisher.

## Conclusion: what lessons can we draw?

The question ‘but is it sustainable?’ is often asked of new OA publishing initiatives. But the partial sale of AUP highlights that the same question might also be asked of “traditional” publishing - it can be fragile, complex and, in individual instances, may prove to be unsustainable. “Traditional” or “legacy” publishing models are not inherently more stable than community-led, collectively funded OA models. Over time, other university publishers may also fail – either closing down,<sup>9</sup> or being acquired, and AUP, in its post-UvA Ventures phase, lasted only 6 years before a drastic amputation occurred (2019-2025). Other universities may be tempted to follow the University of Amsterdam’s lead and lease out, or even sell, their university press – particularly given the crises that currently grip higher education systems in various countries around the world. However, as well as raising issues of the kind discussed in this article, other examples show that this is not always beneficial to the long-term viability of the press. Nottingham University Press, for example, ceased publishing in 2013 (IPG n.d.). Their backlist is currently maintained by CAB International (CABI 2024). Likewise, Dundee University Press was acquired by Edinburgh University Press in 2013 (Dundee UP n.d.) and now has no visible presence as an imprint on their website (although it is hard to extrapolate the success of the sale from this fact).

The pressures that lead university presses to agree to commercial partnerships or takeovers are undoubtedly real and complex – much of Copim’s own work building infrastructure to support OA book publishing requires a practical engagement with such challenges. But their consequences are also real and potentially far-reaching, and should be considered with equal seriousness. If such sales

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<sup>9</sup> For example, in 2019, Stanford University proposed plans to withdraw its subsidy to Stanford University Press, which would have almost certainly led to the press’s closure (see: <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/05/01/stanford-backs-down-year-ending-support-university-press>). This decision was eventually reversed only after widespread outcry (see: <https://save-sup.org/>).

pass without comment, and the university press 'brand' and prestige can indeed be bought by commercial actors, then we must question the validity of university press brands in and of themselves without careful stewardship from the universities and their communities.

For us, the immediate lessons to draw from this sale are that there are too many unspoken assumptions about university publishing, scant knowledge about its variations and complexities, and little transparency and awareness around critical issues of governance and control. These topics urgently need greater discussion: among university presses and universities, among academic authors and series editors, and among professional scholarly publishing bodies and communities more broadly.

As we have tried to emphasise throughout this piece, university presses vary greatly in their size, their organisation, their legal identities and economic models, their relationship to their parent institution, and other factors. Consequently, the responses of each to the questions we have raised in this piece will vary accordingly – for example, an operationally independent, historically successful university press of long standing will have a different relationship to its parent university than a recently established open access press publishing two or three books a year, creating a completely different context for conversations about the governance of the press, or the risks of it being sold to a large corporate publisher. However, we would like to see these conversations happen transparently and openly as far as possible, between presses and universities but also among scholars. If you publish with a particular university press, or edit a series there, what do you know about its approach to these questions, and who can you speak to about them? The Stockholm Declaration (Sabel and Larhammar 2025) is not unique among open access declarations in envisioning the ideal future of academic publishing being relinquished, as far as is possible, from commercial constraints – this has also been a major argument that Copim has made in our community-led approaches, for example – but this will not be achieved without active participation from scholars, both within institutions and without.

Rather than open access publishing being seen as a product or service that is undertaken by a third party, Copim endeavours for a “publishing system that is set up with a focus on care and alternative relationalities and that is value-driven” (Adema and Moore 2024). Our community of communities approach (Hopkins et al 2024) necessitates engagements with a range of actors and organisations, which includes scholar-led and institutional publishers amongst them, to foster a biodiverse ecosystem (Adema et al 2024). As discussed above, an example of how we have implemented this careful approach can be found in Open Book Collective’s governance (OBC, n.d.). This approach to governance explicitly values the diversity and expertise of the community and centres this through their direct participation in the governance of the OBC. This exceeds service engagements and other forms of representation by including diverse communities entangled with OBC in the organisation’s strategic operations. We would welcome such participatory approaches to governance being explored in other contexts such as within institutional publishing. This could help protect institutional publishers (whether open or closed access) from the extractive hands of the market and enhance their own political and economic sustainability (Barnes et al 2024) as community oriented and led operations. Such governance requires a significant focus on the broader publishing ecosystem within which they are situated, enabling communities to mutually support infrastructures and publishers in the spirit of collaboration rather than a pretence of competition. Such collectively governed approaches require active participation in the broader operational and strategic realities of publishing. This deliberately creates opportunities and agency beyond traditional, vertically oriented power structures that we commonly experience across academia and scholarly publishers; it cannot

be assumed that, just because a press carries the badge of a university, that it is being run with the values of its scholars if they are not active within its governance.

Assumptions and their pitfalls are, in fact, a theme that runs throughout the situation we have outlined above: assumptions about press values, about the rights retained (and not retained) by authors in their legal contracts, and about what social contract exists between authors and their publishers regarding topics such as the use of their work and the ownership of a press. Assumptions around these vital topics can lead to author exploitation and dissatisfaction. A necessary counter to this is for authors to be aware of these topics. Indeed, awareness and understanding of these issues are necessary to engage meaningfully with governance.<sup>10</sup>

As such, we encourage the communities involved in institutional research, publishing, and dissemination of scholarly publications to delve more deeply into the broader environments that they are all working within. We encourage publishers to put the needs of their stakeholders first, to listen to and implement their feedback, value their participation, and we encourage authors to be curious about the governance of the presses to which they entrust their research. Consider becoming an active part of a strong ecosystem of community-led OA infrastructures and to nurture that ecosystem. We urge all interested communities around institutional publishing to consider these questions:

What are the values of an institutional press, and how are those values put into action and safeguarded for the future? How are institutional presses governed and controlled, and by whom? And finally, are the press' values up for sale – and who is buying?

## Data availability statement

No data were created or analysed in this paper.

## Competing Interests

As acknowledged in the text, at the time of writing and submission, all authors were members of the [Copim Open Book Futures project](#) team. Tom Grady and Kira Hopkins worked on the Opening the Future Revenue Model (Work Package 3), which was partnered with Central European University Press. Central European University Press signed a [partnership agreement](#) with Amsterdam University Press in July 2024. All authors remain active within the ongoing [Copim community](#).

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<sup>10</sup> There are many resources around this, such as institutional library guides, for example: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/library/learning-teaching-support/ucl-copyright-advice/copyright-and-your-research-publications>, or broader resources such as <https://acrl.libguides.com/scholcomm/toolkit/authorsrights>, and <https://openaccessbooksnetwork.hcommons.org/oa-mythbusters/>

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