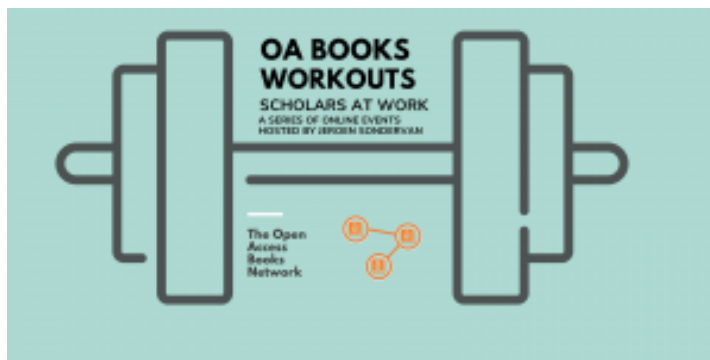


“Just doing it”: Five Talks on Digital Scholarship and Open Book Publishing

By [Jeroen Sondervan](#), Utrecht University Library

*In this post, Jeroen Sondervan reflects on the OA Workouts: Scholars at Work series he hosted for the Open Access Books Network, discussing what we learned and what others might draw from these examples of open scholarship. **If you are interested in hosting a series yourself, or if you have ideas about what you'd like to see covered in future events, email info@oabooksnetwork.org.***



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Under the banner and with the support of the [Open Access Books Network](#), I organized the series ‘OA Books Workouts’, which were five talks (45 minutes) with humanities scholars from different disciplines (e.g. history, media and innovation studies) about their research and book project. All of them, in their own way, have experimented with innovative ways of openly writing and publishing.

For many, the actual act of ‘publishing’ already started in the research phase and culminated in a ‘final’ book that was eventually openly available in a digital format, and in most cases also was published in hard copy with an academic press. My idea for the series was to hear about all these different approaches and learn from the open working methods and practices they used. We made [recordings](#) and produced [written interviews](#) to guarantee that the discussions would be available across all time zones of the world.

As a former commissioning editor myself (Amsterdam University Press, 2007-2016) I have always had a great interest in the extent to which digitization, and the ability to work with different formats, have an influence on the way in which books are published. Open access as a dissemination strategy is one thing, but the development of new digital tools has created opportunities for enrichment (e.g. adding research data and visualisations to the text); multi-faceted participation (open and community review of different versions, including post publication review); and maximizing reuse and dissemination (free access, different formats and reusing and remixing research). These examples all show that there are many more possibilities when publishing a book in a digital environment, with the potential to dramatically transform how research results are communicated. With new [publishing](#)

[software](#) and tools that are becoming easier and often free to use, we can step out of the realm of seeing the book as, and I'm quoting Janneke Adema, the first speaker in the series, here: 'as linear, bound, and fixed', but instead view it as a living and collaborative project, which can benefit from remixing and experimentation.

The conversation about open access is often still driven by organizations (i.e. funders, publishers, libraries) and policies (who needs to do what? When and how?). The actual writing and publishing of a book is still subject to long-entrenched traditions, for example involving recognition and reward: obtaining a permanent position often still depends on the publication of a paper book with a 'well-known' publisher. All speakers touched upon this in their talks and faced skepticism from others at times, be they supervisors, peers, university staff, funders. But they all persevered and paved their own path, in which they really believed.

You don't often hear about the experiences of scholars who dared to go off the beaten track, or scholars who are intrinsically motivated to opt for open working methods and access, which often also serves a very specific purpose that benefits their research. That is precisely why I wanted to start the OA Books Workouts series, so others can hear about and learn from these open research and publishing practices, with the aim of enabling others to do the same.

All five scholars whom I invited for the series used different open working methods to achieve their goals, like iterative writing, opening up first drafts of chapters, organizing and facilitating open peer review of preliminary versions of the book using online publishing tools, and adding multimedia or digitized primary annotated sources to the text, to name just a few. I wish to highlight three practices that have come up in all the talks one way or another.

[Iterative writing / versioning](#)

Janneke Adema ([recording](#)), who is an assistant professor in digital media at the Centre for Postdigital Cultures at Coventry University, talked about her [Living Books](#) project, which, alongside a paper version, is published on [PubPub](#). This online iteration allows, as [she explains](#): "different 'releases,' or versioning, i.e., the updating, rewriting, or modifying of published academic material". Creating new iterations and making them public while coherently labelling the different versions is something the other speakers used in some way or another. Like Lucy Montgomery ([recording](#)), professor of innovation studies at Curtin University, who with her fellow authors used the method of book sprinting to quickly produce a first draft (or iteration) of the book *Open Knowledge Institutions*. In my [conversation](#) with her, she explained that: "The book was written in 2018: by 13 authors during a five-day 'Book Sprint'. At the end of the workshop we were fortunate to be invited to work with MIT Press as part of a practical experiment in open publishing".

[Open Peer/Community Review](#)

The projects described above made use of peer review of a 'record of versions'.¹ In the case of Janneke Adema, the PubPub platform is used for post-publication peer review, gathering feedback, annotations and comments to produce new possible versions. In the case of Lucy Montgomery's project it included sharing an early draft of the book via the MIT Press [Works](#)

¹ For further reading on this: [OASPA \(2021\) Guest Post by Jean-Claude Gu  don: Scholarly Communication and Scholarly Publishing](#) and credit to my Utrecht University colleagues Bianca Kramer and Jeroen Bosman for pushing the term for a longer time now: <https://twitter.com/jeroenbosman/status/1482125103798358017?s=20>

[in Progress](#) site and using the PubPub platform to support a process of open peer review. Also Whitney Trettien [[recording](#)], assistant professor of English at University of Pennsylvania, opened up early drafts of her research, in her case using the [Manifold platform](#), allowing others to engage with, comment on and annotate her work online.

Publishing tools /platforms

As you can see from these examples, all have used (new) publishing software to be able to fulfill specific wishes. So did the two other speakers, Jeff Pooley and Miklós Kiss. In the case of Kiss [[recording](#)], associate professor of audiovisual arts and cognition at the University of Groningen, [Scalar](#) was used to publish the book [Film Studies in Motion: From Audiovisual Essay to Academic Research Video](#). Audiovisual essays, or, as Kiss argues, academic research videos, are a new emerging publishing format in media studies and come as edited video-files to make a scholarly argument. Miklos needed a place where he could publish the actual multimedia files, preferably integrated in the book publication itself. At the time of writing, no publishers were able to deliver such a specific service, so he used Scalar to make it happen.

Jeff Pooley [[recording](#)], professor of media & communication at Muhlenberg College and director of open access press [mediastudies.press](#), used PubPub to develop an 'Open Reader': [Social Media & the Self](#). The reader is a collection of openly available works online, albeit that individual papers are being made available under various licenses (e.g. from public domain to Creative Commons licensed material) and conditions. The flexibility of the PubPub platform is enormous. As a researcher, but in Pooley's case also owning a scholar-led press, it enabled him to publish the reader relatively quickly, sustainably and according to high academic standards. In fact, the system is so flexible that during his talk he [created and published](#) a comment piece on his Open Reader as part of his presentation.

During her presentation of the Manifold version of [Cut/Copy/Paste](#), Whitney Trettien [showed](#) how she can build so-called 'Resource Collections'. These contain annotated images, datasets, but also dynamic graphs which are connected to the text, making it a very nice example of an 'enriched' publication.

Closing remarks

Before I started the series, I already was aware of several experiments with book publishing and enriching publications, especially in the field of media studies, due to my earlier commissioning work in that area (I wrote about this earlier [here](#) and [here](#) – and just recently [this nice thread](#) from the COPIM project was published, showcasing many different examples in this area). Despite some prior knowledge, I have learned an incredible amount about the book projects discussed in the Workouts sessions. And I have listened with great pleasure and admiration to what the five have achieved by exploring, experimenting, not wanting to see the book as a monolithic object and making online collaboration with others an integral part of the project. I very much hope these examples can serve others who are also on the verge of exploration and experimentation.

Now closing off with the title of this blog: "Just doing it". I [quote](#) Whitney Trettien here, when we talked about how her open research practices and publishing were received by her peers and university staff, and how these efforts are evaluated and assessed. In all the sessions, this came up at one time or another. In some cases, tenure obviously helped the speakers to be

able to engage with novel ways of researching, writing and publishing. But they all noted that they just started doing it, without necessarily everyone around them being convinced of the approach. One (simple) reason for this resistance on the part of others could be the unfamiliarity of the 'new' and the safety of the 'traditional'. Hopefully this series will contribute to a continuous discussion on practicing open research and new innovative ways of book publishing.

These examples, and there are many more out there of course, can be a driver and incentive for others and influence (policy) changes (such as in the area of recognition and reward structures) in academia. To break with certain academic traditions and processes, you sometimes just need people who believe in something and "just do it".

I want to sincerely thank the core team behind the Open Access Books Network, namely Agata Morka, Lucy Barnes and Tom Mosterd for all their help setting up the series and assistance during the calls.



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