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PRACTICE ARTICLE

# The Open Book Environment (OBE) Dashboard: A Tool for Increasing Publisher Transparency for Authors, Librarians, and the Scholarly Community

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**ABSTRACT**

**Introduction:** The Open Book Environment (OBE) Dashboard is introduced as a pioneering tool aimed at fostering transparency and clarity in the realm of open access book publishing. In response to the growing need for accessible information for authors, librarians, and stakeholders, this dashboard aggregates data from a multitude of publishers into a centralized platform.
**Description of Program/Service:** Employing a comprehensive set of criteria, including pricing for book processing charges (BPCs), licensing options, editorial quality statements, and self-archiving policies, the Dashboard evaluates publisher transparency. Through a color-coded system, it visually represents the degree of openness exhibited by each publisher, empowering authors to make informed decisions about where to publish their work.
**Next Steps:** Looking ahead, the Dashboard's dynamic nature allows for continuous updates, facilitating its role as an agent for positive change within the scholarly publishing community. As a versatile resource, the OBE Dashboard holds promise in enhancing efficiency, transparency, and accountability in open access book publishing.

Open Book Environment (OBE) Dashboard: https://bit.ly/OBEdashboard
OBE Additions and Edits Form: https://bit.ly/OBEdashboardform
Zenodo Link: https://zenodo.org/records/13366056

**Keywords:** open books, open access, transparency, open book publishing, open access policies, Open Book Environment Dashboard, OBE Dashboard

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## INTRODUCTION

The need for open academic book publishing has intensified as funders and researchers increasingly recognize open books as a critical part of the global research ecosystem. Acknowledging the need for more outputs from research to be made openly available, a number of major UK-based research funding organizations such as the Wellcome Trust and UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) mandate open access for long-form output types for grantees under their policy requirements (Wellcome, 2024; UKRI, 2024). A similar recognition in the United States led to the 2022 Nelson Memo's requirement for open access short-form publications resulting from publicly funded research, and one could easily imagine an expansion of the requirement to include long-form publications.

Coupled with the ongoing advocacy and outreach carried out by librarians, information and research support professionals, and researchers themselves, open access for scholarly books is developing at a steady pace. However, open book publishing is still in its infancy in comparison with open-article publishing. Similar to short-form publications, open book publishing faces the complexities of varying routes for open publication, disciplinary differences and expectations, issues of quality control, and ever-increasing costs associated with publication (Knöchelmann, 2017). And yet, open book publishing is unique in the degree of obscurity that remains around its business model. Questions are frequent around publisher policies related to licensing, archiving, and the services an author can expect in exchange for a book processing charge (BPC). For authors of open access articles, tools such as Jisc's Open Policy Finder and the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) outline licensing and archiving and provide information on article processing charges (APCs). Because of this, article authors have a fair sense of what to expect when submitting an article to a publisher. Open book authors, on the other hand, lack these resources and face a much larger degree of ambiguity. The Open Book Environment (OBE) Dashboard seeks to lessen this ambiguity by providing authors, librarians, and others in scholarly communications with a useful set of data to inform decision-making and promote transparency throughout the academic open book publishing field.

### The price for open access publishing: a call for accountability

Since its inception, the phrase "open access" has become synonymous with transparency, visibility, and increased equity of access to information (Budapest Open Access Initiative, 2002; Suber, 2012). However, pricing associated with open access publishing remains anything but transparent, visible, or equitable. In many cases, clear breakdowns of pricing continue to be illusive, opaque, and inconsistent across the publishing landscape. Information on BPC prices and open access services for authors on publisher websites is very hard to locate, creating a

barrier for authors who would like to publish their work open access. In carrying out an assessment of publisher websites and BPC charges for this paper, the authors found that BPC-based open book publishers are charging from £4,000/$5,000 to £18,000/$22,000 per BPC. Many BPC-based publishers did not list a price at all and instead encouraged authors to be in touch with their editor. A number of studies have discussed the complexity of the various services and charges that go into a BPC (Pinter, 2018; Maron et al., 2016; Universities UK Open Access and Monographs Group, 2019); however, open book publishing does not seem so complex that publishers cannot provide, at the very least, a range of pricing and information regarding the services authors can expect in return for their BPC. Some publishers manage to do exactly that and make clear what services they provide to prospective authors alongside the price, and, in some cases, publishers have gone so far as to itemize their BPCs (Open Book Publishers, 2024). This level of transparency is to be applauded when it happens, but many more publishers opt for providing obtuse or vague information or no information at all. When BPCs remain notoriously expensive, and the reasons for this are indeterminate, authors are left to conjecture and make assumptions about the profits being harvested by publishers.

However, alternative open publishing options exist for book authors. Many not-for-profit, scholar-led, and university presses that publish academic research without charging the author or the reader are becoming established in the open book sphere. In recent years, funded initiatives such as the Community-led Open Publication Infrastructures for Monographs (COPIM) and the Open Book Futures project alongside consortiums such as ScholarLed have sought to drive a model for open access books that does not rely on the BPC or the dominance of large commercial actors and instead supports the notion of "scaling-small" by offering a greater diversity for authors of open books (Adema & Moore, 2021). Unfortunately, these entities struggle to compete with large commercial publishers for a number of reasons, including the power and size of commercial publishing conglomerates, as well as persistent misconceptions concerning quality, prestige, and branding (Khoo, 2019).

As a response to the myriad challenges faced by the scholarly community at large, the authors felt it important to help reduce researcher burden and to bring about greater transparency around open book publishing practices via the creation of the OBE Dashboard. Existing services such as the Directory of Open Access Books (DOAB), a key resource providing open access to published works and metadata, does not provide information on the cost of BPCs, licensing, or other publisher-level data. Recently, Open Policy Finder, maintained by Jisc in the UK, updated its information to include data on BPCs and licensing requirements in a publisher-by-publisher format (Jisc, 2024). As helpful as this information is, the Jisc tool is not designed for browsability, the quick comparison of publishers, or transparency assessment. The OBE Dashboard is unique in that it provides a broad range of publisher information that can be quickly compared and provides an assessment of publishers based on their level of

transparency. Publishers are assessed based on the information that they provide in the following categories: pricing for BPCs, licensing, clarity on editorial quality, retrospective open access options, and fee waivers or discounts. The OBE Dashboard's focus on transparency positions it as a resource that can be used by authors, funders, or publishers themselves to create a more robust and transparent open book environment.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Open access and its extension to the scholarly monograph or academic book has been a topic of great interest, research, and discussion in recent years, and a call for more transparent BPC pricing has been well-documented throughout the literature (Fathallah, 2022; Frankl, 2023; Ferwerda et al., 2023; Goudarzi et al., 2021; Knöchelmann, 2018; Montgomery, 2013; Maron et al., 2016; Maron & Schmelzinger, 2022; Nordhoff, 2018; Nordhoff, 2019; Ferwerda et al., 2017; Penier et al., 2020; Pinter, 2018; Roughley Barake & Welsby, 2021; Snijder, 2019; Snijder, 2023). Whereas much has been written about which services can or should be accounted for regarding open access and books, very little has been written about what information actually is readily provided to prospective authors.

In a 2013 workshop report commissioned by Knowledge Unlatched, Montgomery notes the scholarly community's frustration with publishers' lack of transparent open book pricing and noted that trust can only be built with invested stakeholders when costs are clearly defined and understood. Similarly, a 2016 report by Maron et al. for an Ithaka S+R report considers the costs involved with producing open books across a range of university presses. The report makes clear that in order for the open monograph space to evolve and develop, it is essential for publishers to provide more clarity and transparency around open access accounting strategies, especially to funding agencies whose grants require open access publication (Maron et al., 2016). In a landmark study investigating open access monograph publishing across eight European countries, Ferwerda et al. (2017) bring together a range of different country perspectives on open access book publishing with the issue of transparency being a central facet of the report. The authors highlight how important funding organizations' efforts are to monitor the landscape of open access books and understand how progress is being made around transparent pricing. These efforts are crucial to help authors make clear, informed decisions when choosing a publisher, especially relating to quality assurance. Although both reports attempt to account for open access monograph pricing, as Nordhoff (2019) articulates, "they only show aggregated costs," and a study on the price of creating scholarly monographs from the perspective of a commercial publisher is yet to be produced. Librarians have also noted the need for more transparency from publishers relating to fees and the processes involved in open book publishing, as well as the benefits that this would bring to service delivery if publishers provided clearer information regarding their open access prices

(Roughley Barake & Welsby, 2021). The UKRI Gap Analysis of Open Access Monographs Infrastructure (UKRI, 2021) states in its "analysis and recommendations" section, "There is a perceived lack of transparency in monograph publishing…Authors need to be better supported and…funders and institutions need to improve infrastructure to support compliance with policies and monitor research outputs."

Knöchelmann (2018) addresses broader issues around the visibility, lack of transparency, and commercial interest of the academic publishing industry in the open access book space in terms of its influence on the market itself and the future direction of policy development for open access books. Knöchelmann's piece reveals the potential conflict of interest of a large commercial entity in the academic publishing industry harnessing the power to sway policy development for open access books and enshrine the BPC in funder policies as the preferred route to achieve open book publication. This maintains the current economy in the publishing landscape and hinders bibliodiversity and, essentially, author choice. Unequivocally, the literature showcases over a decade of mistrust across the academic publishing landscape and an ongoing sense of opacity relating to open access and the academic book. Although it is recognized that the open book ecosystem is nuanced and diverse, this complexity should not prohibit publishers from providing perspicuity on what fees are charged and how these fees are determined. Lack of good publisher information slows the transition to open access for long-form publication types and erodes trust that publishers are acting responsibly.

## DESCRIPTION OF PROGRAM/SERVICE

### Creating the OBE Dashboard

The OBE Dashboard was created in response to the need for clear, concise, and accurate publisher information. An earlier resource created by Joseph Ripp, Research Outputs Manager at Oxford Brookes University in the UK, provided information on permission requests and open access policies for books and chapters; however, this resource is no longer active. The OBE Dashboard builds on this earlier work by providing an extended range of publisher information and outlining which information is available, which is not, and which publishers do the best job of making information transparent.

The authors and creators of the OBE Dashboard work in the field of scholarly communications and liaison librarianship, respectively. Each has witnessed the daunting task faced by researchers trying to make informed decisions regarding the dissemination of their work based on incomplete and often obtuse information provided by publishers. Given these challenges, our idea was to put the information gathered from many publishers in one place and then make apparent what information was lacking or unclear. Work began by identifying an initial

group of publishers to include in the Dashboard. We reviewed the DOAB, as well as the Online Library and Publication Platform (OAPEN)'s list of open book publishers. Both publisher lists were sorted by number of books published, and the top 30 English-language publishers from each list were combined into a single list. Given that there was a substantial amount of overlap between the DOAB and OAPEN lists, 39 publishers emerged as the publishers with the greatest number of English-language open books. We recognize that many publishers were left out of this initial accounting. Many consortia publishers seemed to be missing from the DOAB and OAPEN lists, and the numbers of volumes published in some cases also seemed surprising. However, we very much viewed, and continue to view, the Dashboard as a work to be added to in the future. Publishers absent in the initial version of the Dashboard can be added at a later date. This was the intention at the time of assembling the initial publisher list, and it remains the intention going forward.

Once our initial publisher list was finalized, we began creating a basic set of criteria that we believed publishers should provide to authors. These criteria include the following:

- information on BPC pricing;
- licensing options;
- statements on editorial quality;
- options for self-archiving or inclusion in a repository;
- possibilities for retrospectively making previously published work open; and
- information on fee waivers and discounts.

We also included the following three additional categories: consortia agreements, pricing information/justification, and source or additional information. We consider these criteria to be optional. Although we initially hoped to get detailed information regarding justifications for pricing, very few publishers provided any justification or explanation; therefore, we moved this column to the optional categories and instead focused on finding and providing a stated BPC price.

We then set out to assess publisher transparency in each basic criteria category in the bulleted list provided. It is important to note that our assessments were not based on a publisher's providing or offering a given criterion but rather on a publisher providing information about a criterion. For example, a publisher might choose to prohibit self-archiving or inclusion in a repository and still be labeled "transparent" if the publisher clearly states this as their policy. The OBE Dashboard is built on the premise that publishers may make different policy decisions, have varying pricing models, provide tailored levels of editorial service, and allow or disallow certain uses of

materials; however, all of these publisher decisions should be made readily apparent and easy for prospective authors to find and understand. The OBE Dashboard was created so that users can make informed decisions regarding the publishing options available to them.

As we reviewed publishers to assess transparency, we evaluated each criterion and labeled criteria as one of the following: 1) transparent, i.e., information was readily available on the publisher's website; 2) not transparent, i.e., information was not available on the publisher's site; or 3) information had been obtained via personal communication with the publisher. The final label reflected our early attempts to directly email publishers to get information. However, this proved to be so time-consuming that we eventually stopped attempting to obtain information in this way. However, we did find some of the information gleaned in personal communications to be useful and included it using this final label.

In the Dashboard, criteria are represented in their own columns, and colors are assigned based on each publisher's level of transparency for a given criterion. If a publisher makes information readily available for a criterion, that criterion is coded as "transparent" and colored green. If information is not available for a given criterion, that criterion is coded as "not transparent" and colored red. If information on a criterion was obtained through personal communication with a publisher, that criteria is coded as "personal communication" and colored yellow (see Appendix). Once transparency coding was complete, the Dashboard was re-ranked. Publishers with a greater degree of transparency (i.e., more green) were pushed higher up the Dashboard, and publishers with a lesser degree of transparency (i.e., more red) were pushed lower.

The purpose of color coding and ranking based on the publisher's provided information is not to make a value judgement about one publisher being "better" or "worse" than another. In fact, a publisher might include on their Web pages very unfavorable policies and be coded green because the publisher makes these unfavorable policies readily apparent and findable. Another publisher with more favorable policies might be coded red because they fail to share those policies or make them apparent. Throughout, our driving question remains "Is the information present?" This specific, closed question allows the Dashboard's color-coded transparency rankings a high degree of objectivity and avoids murkier issues of "quality" or "value." Our belief is that encouraging publishers to provide more complete information will ultimately benefit authors, funders, and publishers themselves and end up improving the open book environment for all.

## Dissemination and reception

After compiling the Dashboard's data and color-coding transparency assessments for each criterion, it was ready for dissemination. The Dashboard was shared via the UK Council of Open

Research and Repositories (UKCORR) and Library and Information Sciences Links (LIS Links) JiscMail lists in the UK, with internal networks and channels at UK institutions, as well as the Association for College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Scholarly Communication Discussion Group (SCHOLCOMM) list in the United States. Initial feedback was quite promising, with many librarians and information professionals commenting on the usefulness and utility of a centralized interface for open book publication. It has also been incorporated into many UK institutions' open access LibGuides and library websites. Along with the release of the Dashboard, it has been archived in Zenodo and can be downloaded under a CC-BY-NC-SA license.

The work of maintaining and updating the dashboard has, to this point, been solely supported by authors' institutions and allocations of time. If the tool were to greatly expand in size or scope, the resources of a larger entity would be necessary to expand and maintain it. Similarly, although it would be desirable to include a greater number of non-English-language publishers, this currently exceeds the capacity of the authors and would require additional collaborators. As ever, time, resources, and devoted attention are a limit to any project; however, we felt that starting the project was a worthwhile endeavor and are open to seeing how continued stewardship develops over time.

We envision the Dashboard's audience to be both researchers looking to publish their work and librarians helping to inform publication decisions. As previous literature has suggested, there is much regarding open book publishing that is complex and nuanced. However, it is not so complex or nuanced that publisher policies, pricing, and licensing need to remain obscure. Even complicated book-processing charge schemes can be represented in a way that makes sense to authors. By being transparent, publisher policies, pricing, and licensing appear less arbitrary to the authors that they are trying to attract, and researchers can then make better-informed decisions based on the information available to them.

The OBE Dashboard also incorporates a submission form through which users can suggest additions and edits. This form was released alongside the Dashboard, and it is our intention to incorporate user-submitted additions and edits into a quarterly revision. We have already had numerous submissions through the form, many of which have been incorporated into our first major revision. Some publishers have already used the form to suggest their addition to the Dashboard or to provide additional information. It is important to note that, given the Dashboard's focus on transparency, assessments cannot not be changed until the information put through the form is made publicly available on the publisher's site. A publisher submitting information through the form is not enough for the reassessment of a given criterion. The information must be included and easily findable on a publisher's website.

Whereas our intention in creating the Dashboard was to provide authors, librarians, and those working in scholarly communications with a valuable tool to support author choice, we were happy to learn that the Dashboard is already being used by publishers to improve the information on their sites and add a level of clarity regarding open access book publishing where it is needed. Since presenting the Dashboard at an April 2024 webinar hosted by Jisc and the Open Access Books Network, some publishers have begun to improve and update the information on their websites based on their OBE Dashboard assessment. It is our hope that actions such as this continue and that the OBE Dashboard fosters a scholarly open book environment that is increasingly transparent, accessible, and informative.

## LESSONS LEARNED AND NEXT STEPS FOR THE DASHBOARD

We envision the Dashboard to be a constantly evolving tool, with information changing frequently. As researchers, librarians, and publishers continue to provide information, we will continue to update it. Our first major revision to the Dashboard happened in the summer of 2024 and reflected several updates made by publishers and requests for amendments and or additions by other publishers to be included. We aim to continue updating on a quarterly basis. We considered making the Dashboard a completely open-community resource but decided that the likelihood of it being mistakenly changed, modified, or inadvertently deleted was too great. A degree of editorial stewardship seems necessary to ensure the integrity of the data. For the time being, we hope that the input form provides an avenue for users to make contributions and suggested revisions.

As the data in the Dashboard expand, we hope the tool's reach expands as well. Visibility, use, and engagement will only improve the OBE Dashboard, and the Dashboard, in turn, will hopefully provide valuable information to users in one place and encourage publishers to provide prospective authors with complete information in a number of different areas. Although not an anticipated use, some newly fledged open book publishing projects have been in contact and are using the Dashboard as a checklist to ensure that they provide authors with a comprehensive set of information.

It is our belief that the Dashboard can become an agent of change by providing authors and information professionals with the ability to more easily make informed decisions and by holding publishers accountable for the information (or lack of information) that they provide. Ultimately, the Dashboard should be seen as a multifaceted resource that can be used as an evaluation and assessment tool for a number of different user groups. Authors can use the Dashboard to make better-informed decisions when submitting their work; institutions and funders may find it useful to make decisions regarding which publishers, open publishing initiatives, and consortia to support; and publishers can ensure that they are being as clear as

possible regarding their policy decisions in a number of different areas. Fundamentally, we hope that the OBE Dashboard will improve efficiency and transparency and help to encourage accountability across the open book environment.

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# APPENDIX

| | A | B | C | D | E |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | **Publisher** | **Pricing** | **Licensing Information** | **Statement of Editorial Quality** | **Green OA / Self Archiving** |
| 28 | MIT Press | Institutional participation in Direct 2 Open for monographs<br>Case by case for textbooks | MIT recommend that authors attribute CC-BY-NC-ND. However, they will work with the author on choosing the license. | "Whether or not a book is published OA in digital form has no bearing on how it is curated, peer reviewed, edited, designed, or marketed by the Press. All books proceed through the same quality assurance processes and receive the same support from the press." https://direct.mit.edu/books/pages/Open_Access | The use of a Creative Commons (CC-B license permits sharing via repositories. |
| 29 | University of North Carolina | For now, we target $7,500 as a minimum stipend for immediate open access. But any author who wishes their book to be published OA should reach out to us to explore options. https://uncpress.org/oa-vision/ | Our current priority is the newly announced Path to Open pilot, developed by UNC Press, the University of Michigan Press, and the American Council of Learned Societies, and being operationalized by JSTOR. Path to Open is an imperfect solution which necessitates paywalls to access for three years before a book becomes completely open. But it has the potential to open far more new university press monographs than any other program, and it does so without any external or grant funding. https://uncpress.org/oa-vision/ | No information provided. | No information provided. |
| 30 | Elsevier | $17000, £13,374.66.<br>$1,700, £1,337.47 chapter charge.<br><br>https://www.elsevier.com/en-gb/open-access/books | "Open access books are made available under the CC-BY-NC-ND license."<br><br>https://www.elsevier.com/en-gb/open-access/books | No information provided.<br><br>https://www.elsevier.com/en-gb/open-access/books | "Authors wishing to self-archive boo continue to reach out to Global Righ relevant permission."<br><br>https://www.elsevier.com/en-gb/oper s |
| 31 | Oxford University Press | The fee to publish Open Access is usually between $15k and $23k.Approximmately, £11,761.88 - £18,040.28. | "OUP can support your open access requirements by making a version available for free download and re-use under a Creative Commons licence via our websites, as well as third party discovery sites such as Directory of Open Access Books, OAPEN Library, PMC Bookshelf, and Google Books." https://global.oup.com/academic/open-access/?cc=us&lang=en& | No information provided. | No information provided. |
| 32 | Indiana University Press | No information provided online. Emails not returned. | No information provided. | No information provided. | No information provided. |

The Open Book Environment (OBE) Dashboard criteria coding example.