

09. Editorial

Managing the production of high quality, potentially peer reviewed, Open Access academic books

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Key issues

The editorial process is at the heart of publishing. However well a publisher markets and disseminates its books, however well its books are designed, copy edited and typeset, it is likely to be the content of its books on which it will be ultimately judged. For scholar-led publishers, this usually means a strong focus on soliciting and delivering texts with high levels of academic quality and integrity. However, there are broader issues at stake. How publishers engage with authors and editors may play a significant role in the press' reputation amongst relevant academic communities.

Such issues are often particularly important for smaller and scholar-led Open Access presses. On the one hand, potential authors and readers may – often unfairly – have concerns about issues around quality for presses operating outside the commercial mainstream. On the other hand, many such publishers are more explicitly values-driven than large publishers. For these reasons, the editorial process is an opportunity to both allay concerns about quality and to put into practice a publisher's ethics and values.

An opportunity for small and scholar-led publishers

Within the Open Access community there is often a strong focus on seeking to demonstrate that a publisher's work matches the standards of large commercial publishers. This can mean overlooking that, in many cases, smaller presses can offer a better editorial experience for authors. For smaller and scholar-led publishers, issues of [academic 'care'](#) are sometimes foregrounded to a greater extent than in some commercial publishing contexts, with publishers keen to offer a more engaged editorial process.

Whatever a press' approach to working with its authors intellectually, it should carefully consider how, practically, to manage author relationships (see Nordhoff in [Cookbook](#), Gatti in [Business Models for OA Books](#)). Making clear to authors exactly what the press' approach to the editorial process is a crucial part of this. So too is ensuring good channels of communication throughout, as well as ensuring that authors have a good understanding of what the different stages of the editorial process will be.

Peer review

For many Open Access presses, having a clear approach to peer review is a vital means to ensure the quality of its content, as well as to allay any concerns authors and readers might have about a publisher's standards. It is potentially important for other reasons: indexing and dissemination services can have particular entry requirements around peer review. And peer review can also be a requirement for inclusion in membership organisations (including the [Open Book Collective](#)), or for attracting funding via a library membership scheme.

Assuming peer review, of some type, is to be used – usually after an initial assessment by editors – a key consideration is what, precisely, should be peer-reviewed? A full manuscript? A proposal and a sample of work? Just a proposal? Are expectations the same for monographs as for edited collections? Smaller and scholar-led publishers vary in their approaches, but many require at least a proposal and an indicative sample of work for edited collections, and further material or a full manuscript for monographs.

While the types of peer review used vary hugely between Open Access publishers, many smaller and scholar-led presses are moving away from fully anonymous peer review, towards more open forms of peer review. This perhaps reflects a [growing unease](#) within many academic circles about the efficacy and equity of anonymous peer reviewing, as well as [an argument](#) that anonymous peer reviewing procedures are at odds with some core Open Access principles. Whatever form of reviewing a publisher uses, they may wish to steer away from the [ableist connotations](#) of reference to ‘blind’ peer review.

Options other than fully anonymous peer review include:

- Partially anonymous review, in which reviewers remain anonymous, but the author's identity is known.
- Open peer review, in which author and reviewer identities are made known to each other. This can extend to reviewers continuing to work with authors through the revision process.
- Community or collective review, in which a draft version is published, either publicly or to a closed group, with comments encouraged from participants.

The opportunities digital platforms offer for experimenting with such models have been described in detail by Janneke Adema, Samuel Moore and Tobias Steiner in [a recent article](#). The COPIM report *Promoting and Nurturing Interactions with Open Access Books: Strategies for Publishers and Authors – Part 1: Interaction in Context* is also a useful resource that has a useful contextualization and overview of debates and practices around open peer review.

Publishers do not have to allow only a single type of peer review. For example, both [punctum books](#) and [mediastudies.press](#) offer authors a degree of choice in which form of peer review should be used to assess their work. Often a review template form is made available to reviewers to make sure that reviews are comparable and relevant aspects of the book's quality and fit with the aims and values of the press are assessed, and often to keep the reviews short and manageable.

One of the biggest challenges that all presses face is to finding reviewers, which is especially difficult when it comes to books. It is also unlikely that smaller and scholar-led publishers can pay peer reviewers for their reviewing work. Peer reviewers can be found in different ways. Authors are often asked to make suggestions although these should be evaluated by the press to avoid any conflicts of interest. Recommendations from the board or other academics in the field are another way to identify reviewers, as is a desk search for academics working in the field. It may take a few attempts to find a reviewer who has the time and expertise to undertake a review. The number of

reviewers involved in assessing a book may vary, typically from one to three.

Often in academic publishing, reviewers receive little public credit for their (often unpaid) reviewing work. To enable this work to receive greater recognition, [punctum books](#) acknowledges some of its reviewers as 'Curators' in its books, especially in cases when they become heavily involved in a book's development. [Mattering Press](#) similarly always makes sure to include an acknowledgement to any reviewer involved in an open peer review process (with their permission).

Soliciting proposals and manuscripts

Especially for newer presses without an established reputation, it is unlikely that book proposals will be sent to publishers entirely unsolicited. Editors will therefore have to be proactive. This can mean seeking submissions by issuing calls for proposals, using existing networks and/or institutional contexts (for example, for university presses), or extended networks by spending time at subject-specific conferences and events. This is an approach used by both [White Horse Press](#) and [Mattering Press](#). Particularly for scholar-led presses, this can involve members of a publisher having a dual role – both as an academic presenting at a conference and as a publisher looking for interesting proposals.

Publishers can also promote themselves by having a stand at a conference. [Mattering Press](#) has done this to good effect, including securing heavy discounts from organisers because of their status as a charitable and community-led organiser. The Cookbook also provides advice on how to display books at conferences without paying fees for book stands. At some conferences, [Language Science Press](#) have used a combination of unmanned book stands and conference ambassadors. Copies of books are displayed on an unmanned stand and after the conference, are donated to organisers, student assistants, or libraries (Cookbook, p. 12)

One of the major challenges in starting a small or scholar-led new press is assembling all the documents required to support the submission and editorial process. For this reason, rather than creating documents entirely from scratch, careful consideration should be given to what can be reused and adapted from the materials already published online by other similar publishers. If the licensing terms for such materials are not explicit, permission should be sought (and will likely be given). Here are some resources to begin with:

- Book proposal forms from [Mattering Press](#), [Open Book Publishers](#), [Stockholm University Press](#), [University of Westminster Press](#) (drawing on the [NUP Toolkit](#)).
- Guidelines for authors from [African Minds](#), [Mattering Press](#), [punctum books](#), [Open Book Publishers](#).

Case studies

Some examples of how different small and academic-led presses describe their editorial process:

[White Horse Press](#) (source: direct correspondence)

We have a proposal form to gather quite a lot of initial information, and a book stylesheet which is not downloadable because in books we are prepared to work – within limits – with the authors’ preferred style, so each case is somewhat ‘bespoke’. But the basis of our preferred book style is the stylesheet for our journal Environment and History. All monograph proposals (including sample chapters, chapter outlines etc.) are peer-reviewed by two or three qualified scholars but we do not insist on whole-manuscript peer review. For edited volumes, we have the same system at proposal stage, and require that every essay in the finished volume is reviewed by one person who is not a volume editor, as well as the volume editors. This may be a fellow-contributor and it’s a process we trust the editors to carry out, asking that they keep records but not routinely checking up on them.

[punctum books](#) (source: direct correspondence)

Manuscripts are solicited each year between May and July/August. We won’t accept or review any manuscripts sent to us outside those dates (except in some special cases). We have editorial guidelines for authors detailing what they need to do before they submit a final manuscript to us. punctum books has a two-stage peer review process. Manuscripts are first reviewed by the two directors; after this first level of peer review, they are sent to reviewers selected from the Editorial Advisory Board or externally. We follow [AAUP’s guidelines for “Best Practices for Peer Review,”](#) but we are open to authors choosing the sort of review process that they feel will best serve the development of their work: double-anonymous, single-anonymous, open and transparent, online and crowd-based, etc. Our preference is for open, transparent peer review, where the reviewer and the author know each other.

[African Minds](#) (source: [Business Models for OA Books](#))

Publishing proposals undergo a single-blind review process — the authors are known to the reviewers. Proposals may be reviewed internally, by the Editorial Board and/or by external experts. Manuscripts usually undergo a double-blind peer-review process, although in some cases a single-blind or open review approach has been followed, either at the request of the authors or because of practical reasons. The two expert reviewers are typically one academic based in Africa, and one international expert. All reviewers must be recognized experts in an academic discipline that corresponds with the content of the manuscript, and reviewers must not be affiliated with the same institution as the author(s) or have co-published with any of the authors. Reviews are considered by the Managing Editor in consultation with the relevant expert on the Editorial Board before a decision is taken to accept a proposal or a manuscript for publication. In cases where conflicting reviewer reports are received, a third reviewer is requested to make recommendations.

Questions to guide good practice

- Is the editorial process in line with the values of the press?
- Has full consideration been given to the range of peer review options? Have open peer review and community-based peer review been considered? Can authors choose between different models of peer review?
- Will you solicit manuscripts for particular calls or will the process be open?
- What editorial guidelines will you use?
- Do you have a review template?

Resources

- [NUP Toolkit](#), Publishing Books
- [Cookbook](#), chapter 3.2
- Association of University Presses (2022). Best Practices for Peer Review.
<https://peerreview.up.hcommons.org>
- Janneke Adema, Samuel Moore, Tobias Steiner (2021). 'Part 1: Interaction in Context. In Promoting and Nurturing Interactions with Open Access Books: Strategies for Publishers and Authors'. COPIM. <https://doi.org/10.21428/785a6451.b021e5e7>