Before Progress. On the Power of Utopian Thinking for Open Access Publishing

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In his late-2023 announcement that the open access (OA) movement has 'failed', journalist Richard Poynder cited a number of reasons for giving up on OA. One sign of failure, he wrote, is 'unrealistic expectations about diamond open access and the possibility of the research community "taking back ownership" of scholarly communication'. Good luck with that, he implied. At the same time, Poynder criticized the radical open access community for, in effect, going its own way: its 'scaling small' alternative is doomed for niche irrelevance and, as a result, 'offers little hope of the kind of systemic change that OA would need to succeed' (Poynder, 2023: 1–2). Poynder, a leading observer of the OA scene for two decades, has a point. There is little short-run prospect for the restoration of academic custody over scholarly publishing, on the large scale he has in mind. It's true, too, that the 'scaling small' radical-OA alternative (Adema & Moore, 2021) is, by its own admission, operating on the margins of the commercial system.

Still, I think Poynder is wrong in an important sense, or at least that he is unwise. His defeatism is self-crippling, since his claims may help *bring about* the conditions they purport to merely describe. This essay is a counterpoint—a brief for utopian thinking in scholarly publishing. I argue against a species of resigned realism that concedes too much to present conditions. It is important, contra Poynder (2023: 2), to maintain 'unrealistic expectations'. Whether or not another (scholarly publishing) world is possible, it is important to act *as if* it is. In both the short and medium runs, the way we talk about scholarly communication helps dictate the aperture of imaginative possibility.

There is an important practical dimension to this stance: Utopian statements help to establish the outer edge of what is politically

thinkable, in the Overton-window sense. [i] Utopian thinking, if anything, is even more important to critics of the prevailing publishing system. Without constant renewal, we may exhaust our capacity to imagine an academy-led alternative.

A Reader's Guide to Scholarly Publishing

The state of scholarly publishing, if you squint from 10,000 feet, is a simple binary. You have, on the one hand, five gigantic, profit-maximizing corporations, who publish most of what scholars write. There is, on the other, a smaller nonprofit sphere, composed of university presses, society-run journals, and scholar-led outlets. Spanning both worlds is a 25-year-old campaign for open access—to make reading scholarship free, in effect. The oligopolist publishers were early adopters of open access, since they figured out a business model that could maintain their extraordinary profit margins: the article processing charge (APC). The idea was to charge authors instead of readers, and charge them a lot—often more than $3,000 per article. Many nonprofit publishers embraced the APC too, or its book processing charge (BPC) counterpart. Other nonprofit publishers opted to find funding elsewhere, and to charge neither readers nor authors. A geologic nomenclature has emerged to designate these alternatives: 'gold' for the APC approach, 'diamond' without the charges. In the last decade or so, many in the nonprofit sphere have come to recognize that charging authors merely swaps out one barrier for another—one exclusion for another.

That's a crude picture, one that leaves out smaller for-profits, for example, and the sprawling world of so-called 'repositories', where authors can share pre-formatted, 'green' versions of their manuscripts. There are, moreover, a number of adjacent, but still fundamental groups that make up the publishing system: libraries (who sometimes publish themselves), national and foundation funders, and infrastructure maintainers, who keep the whole enterprise running. University-based academics, ironically, tend not to be much involved, except in editorial roles—a fateful and relevant fact, as it turns out.

And here I want to make a further distinction, one internal to the nonprofit sphere. There is a *radical* publishing community, more-or-less distinct from the nonprofit mainstream. This 'radical' label has no stable referent, and it's not anything like a consensus term. I'm using it to describe those people and initiatives that combine a critique of the prevailing oligopoly with a vision for something substantially better. Broadly speaking, publishers, librarians, funders, and infrastructure-ists in this radical camp hope to restore custody of the

publishing system to the academic community. Most everyone agrees that charging authors to publish is unjust and exclusionary. Many members of this loose community—and I think it is one—hold that any alternative approach should be based on an ethics of care and a commitment to difference, epistemic and otherwise—a notion captured by the principle of 'biblodiversity' (Barnes & Gatti, 2019).

There are half-siloed subcultures within this radical publishing community, mainly rooted in format: one centered on books, another on journals, and a third pre-occupied with repositories. And geographic, linguistic, and other kinds of boundaries mean that there's no collective in the thick, demanding sense. Even so, there is enough cross-pollination and shared commitment to speak in terms of radical publishing, and to call it a community.

In this essay, I address this community as a member. A U.S. media scholar, I help run a small, scholar-led publisher (mediastudies.press), co-edit a diamond OA journal (*History of Media Studies*), and co-lead a preprint repository (MediArXiv). Many of my examples and points of reference are drawn from one subculture, devoted to book publishing, anchored in the US and UK. One pillar of that subculture is a consortium of publishers, ScholarLed, which overlaps with a grant-funded initiative that began life as COPIM, the *Community-led Open Publication Infrastructures for Monographs*.[ii] ScholarLed and the Copim community, as the COPIM project is now called, have affinities, in turn, with the Radical Open Access Collective, a loose membership group that promotes a 'progressive vision for open publishing in the humanities and social sciences' (Radical Open Access Collective, n.d.). The important principle of 'scaling small' (Adema & Moore, 2021) emerged from this sub-community, based on the notion that small and diverse publishers might strengthen, and encourage like-minded allies, through mutual support.

I mention all this to say that, in this essay, I am speaking both locally and globally: I have the scholar-led book publishing world in mind, but also mean—when I invoke 'we' or 'the community'—to refer to something still messier: the radical publishing community in all its baggy, globe- and format-spanning spread.

My main message is to encourage the community to keep taking it big. Talking in sweeping, ambitious terms about the future of scholarly publishing—with vigor and conviction—is an indispensable plank of our collective campaign to recover publishing for the academy. So many other things matter too, I concede, and perhaps more so: to develop and cultivate practices that live and

breathe an alternative publishing ethic, most notably. But let's also contribute our voices, our discourse, to the broader conversation, staking out bold but achievable positions that—in their articulation alone—help nudge a broken but recoverable system.

Why does the point need making? For one, I take seriously Richard Poynder's claim, that we in the radical publishing movement, by tending to our own alternative gardens, have stepped back from the fight to challenge and replace the system at large. It's an unfair charge: the 'scaling small' philosophy, for example, is about a network of initiatives, an alliance of independent presses and infrastructure, that might, over time, offer a viable alternative to the commercial system. I detect, nevertheless, traces of resignation, coupled with enthusiasm for building small-scale alternatives. That is, the radical publishing community flirts at times with a politics of countercultural carve-out, predicated on resigned co-existence with a system that, the feeling is, can't be dislodged.

I may be wrong about this intuition. I don't have a lot of explicit statements to cite. I am convinced, nevertheless, about the seductions of realist resignation, partly because I feel them myself. The sense that there's no large-scale alternative can slip, easily, into an opt-out campaign. In the face of an unmovable system, let's do the next best thing, the reasoning goes—which is live apart, in the publishing equivalent of a commune.

If this line of thinking is attractive, it's because of a pair of hobbling realisms—one that says that nothing fundamental can be changed, which feeds the second, the invitation to turn inward. The first is a publishing-world analogue to what Mark Fisher (2009) has called 'capitalist realism'; the second, 'interstitial realism', I adapt from the sociologist of utopias Erik Olin Wright (2010, 2013).

This essay, as suggested by its title, is a response to this special issue's call for 'Publishing After Progress.' The call for papers, citing Martin Savranksy (2021), asks contributors to share how 'their editing and publishing practices have started to radically contextualise their experience of living and working in a "world after progress" marked by humanitarian and planetary emergencies.' To Savransky, the notion of 'progress' is a quicksand, a source of 'well-meaning dreams of cosmopolitan redemption' that, in practice, leaves us mired in bystander inaction. The *Culture Machine* call agrees, pointing to the 'vital contrast between the abstract viewpoint of "progress thinking" and the concept of situatedness.'

I want to argue against Savransky and against the idea of 'publishing after progress'. Progress thinking—with its utopian scheming about a different publishing world—is perfectly compatible with situated practices and experimentation. I blame the pair of realisms—capitalist and interstitial—for convincing us otherwise. My view is that we should keep scaling small, while also thinking (and talking) bigger.

Capitalist Realism, Scholarly Publishing Edition

'It's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism'. That's how Mark Fisher (2009: 1) opens his *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*. By 'capitalist realism', he means the widespread sense that we are fated to live in a market society—and that, even more, it is 'now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative' (2). The 'capitalist realism' concept has an alternative, but compatible meaning in media studies. In *Advertising, the Uneasy Persuasion,* Michael Schudson (1984) closes the book—one that otherwise absolves the ad industry—with a brilliant chapter analogizing advertising to socialist realism. Advertising, Schudson wrote forty years ago, is the capitalist world's counterpart: 'It does not claim to picture reality as it is but reality as it should be—life and lives worth emulating' (215):

> If the visual aesthetic of socialist realism is designed to dignify the simplicity of human labor in the service of the state, the aesthetic of capitalist realism—without a masterplan of purposes—glorifies the pleasures and freedoms of consumer choice in defense of the virtues of private life and material ambitions. (218)

For Schudson, capitalist realism is an aesthetic generated by, and supportive of, a commercial economy. Fisher refers, instead, to resignation—*realism* not as style, but as antonym to *utopian*. There's an obvious tension here. Capitalist realism is defeatist, for Fisher, whereas Schudson attaches something active, cheerful even, to his coinage: Advertising 'always assumes that there is progress'; it is 'thoroughly optimistic, providing for any troubles that it identifies a solution in a particular product or style of life' (215).

My sense, however, is that these two renderings of 'capitalist realism'—Schudson's and Fisher's—resonate with one another in an instructive way. In Schudson's advertising-aesthetic sense, the term helps explain *how* a market society limits the 'horizons of the thinkable' (Fisher, 2009: 8). We're all on the treadmill of advertising, after all. Its meta-message—that capitalism is fulfillment—makes

stepping off a terrifying act. Advertising itself, as Fisher and many others have noted, repackages dissent as product-adjacent lifestyle advice, which feeds our cynicism and saps our energy to imagine alternatives.

These wider dynamics of capitalist realism are, in the nesting-doll sense, mimicked in specific social spheres, including scholarly publishing. Thus we have the sense that there is no feasible alternative to the five-firm oligopoly (Butler et al., 2023), except on the 'scaling-small' margins. That's the analogue to Fisher's 'capitalist realism'. One reason we may be resigned is that the big commercial players have, with shameless gusto, adopted the slogans of the open access movement. We are subject to a bombardment of press releases, glossy initiatives, and webinars that claim the language of 'open', 'equity', and 'sustainable'—even 'social justice'.

Here is the correlate to advertising in Schudson's sense of 'capitalist realism'. Just as ads commodify rebellion, Elsevier and its peers profit from the very schemes that—on launch—are designed to underlay an alternative. Open access to scholarship? Pivot to usurious, margin-fattening APCs. Preprints and the open repository? Snatch up bepress, SSRN, and Research Square. One-click SciHub downloads? Get Fatter.[iii]

The point isn't merely that dynamics of co-optation operate in both domains—in the wider society, that is, and within scholarly publishing. It's that the *effect* is similar: to drain conviction, deaden enthusiasm, sow cynicism. To shrink, in other words, the horizon of the thinkable. Springer Nature, Wiley, and the rest profit off reformers' idealism and, as a bonus, snuff out their change-the-system ardor along the way. This is capitalist realism, playing out in scholarly publishing.

Real Utopias

One guide to thinking about the interplay of facts and norms is the 'sociology of the possible' proposed by the late Erik Olin Wright. In a series of moving works (2010; 2013), Wright developed the idea of 'real utopias', playing off the imaginary, unattainable status of Thomas More's 16th-century coinage. A real utopia embraces the tension between imagination and reality. Yes, take it big, with your sights on human flourishing—the utopian bit. But also attend, Wright argued, to unintended consequences, tradeoffs, and viability. 'A real utopian', he said in his 2012 presidential address to the American Sociological Association, 'holds on to emancipatory ideals without embarrassment or cynicism but remains fully cognizant of the deep

complexities and contradictions of realizing those ideals' (Wright, 2013: 3).

For Wright (2013: 3), there are four important steps to work toward real utopias. The first two are evaluative, with the second pairing devoted to thinking about alternatives:

1. Specifying the *moral principles* for judging social institutions.
2. Using these moral principles as the standards for *diagnosis and critique* of existing institutions.
3. Developing an account of *viable alternatives* in response to the critique.
4. Proposing a *theory of transformation* for realizing those alternatives.

In the radical publishing world, we have devoted a lot of energy to the first two steps. We have, for example, deployed values like 'scaling small' and bibliodiversity, and then called out their violation in the commercial ecosystem. These are crucial steps, of course. But we've approached, with less avidity, the third and fourth tasks, to imagine alternatives and to plot a way to realize them.

An objection may be leveled: Aren't we *already* thinking about, and working to build, a more just scholarly-publishing world? Consider the Copim community and its offshoots: The initiative, spearheaded by a group of scholar-led presses, has established funding mechanisms, a metadata and dissemination platform, an experimental books project, and—most notably—a culture of mutual care. In a thousand different ways, these efforts have been designed, from the ground up, with values of openness, access, and diversity that, at the same time, underwrite the community's critique of the broader system. Here, then, is an alternative-by-example. Isn't this, at the very least, resonant with Wright's third step?

It is. But I sense some resignation too, an exhaustion of the community's utopian energies. There is, I think, a latent conviction that the effort to re-think the system—the big, sprawling one—is quixotic, doomed to fail. We are better off, according to this view, tending to our own small-scale garden. Of course Elsevier should be dislodged, but the system's sheer momentum, its coupling with shareholder capitalism, makes the prospect unthinkable. So carving out alternative space, on this view, is a rational concession to an entrenched reality—rather than a promissory note toward a systemic overhaul.[iv]

Wright would, almost certainly, applaud the Copim world-building. In *Envisioning Real Utopias,* he (2010: 321–336) develops and defends strategies that he calls *interstitial.* He has in mind campaigns and institutions that exist in the cracks and fissures of capitalism, like worker cooperatives, Wikipedia, or even the public library. The effort of the Copim community, in the context of scholarly publishing, would count as an interstitial intervention in Wright's terms. It is, after all, building an alternative 'on the ground in whatever space is possible' (Wright, 2013: 20).

Wright defends interstitial strategies, the 'things we can do now' (Wright, 2010: 327), from the leftist carp that such efforts may *strengthen* the system—by furnishing a safe, non-threatening enclave of dissent. That's not fair, he writes. Building alternatives to 'capitalist society's niches and margins' not only widens the scope of the possible, but can—in the right conditions, when and if the system's cracks widen—scale up quickly (Wright, 2013: 20).

There is, however, a crucial caveat: The interstitial initiatives and experiments that Wright defends keep the big picture in focus. Their aim, whatever the constraints of the moment, is the 'fundamental transformation of the system as a whole' (2010: 324). Interstitialism for its own sake, untethered from any wider emancipatory aspiration, is a retreat, perhaps even an abdication.

That may be going too far. But there is a risk that pessimism about wider prospects can issue in what I invoked earlier as *interstitial realism.* I detect some of that in radical open-access circles: diminished aspirations at the systemic level, paired with an acceptance of indefinite marginality.

My view is that we should, instead, talk about another scholarly-publishing world—actively, consciously, and repeatedly. The aim should be to refuse the (reasonable but hobbling) sense that 'there is no alternative' to, in our case, oligopolist extractivism. That is: Put aside the question of short-term prospects for a systemic makeover. Project, instead, the useful fiction that these prospects are real and within reach—viewable, that is, along the horizon of imagined possibility.

We should, in other words, shake off the realism—both capitalist and interstitial—and will ourselves to talk in utopian terms about scholarly publishing. This may require, for some, a suspension of disbelief about the scope of the (near-term) possible. That's ok: The *as-if* character of utopian thought is the source of its power. By talking

about a possible world, we help nudge it along—we *enact* the world we hope to inhabit.

This is an old insight, about the performative character of public talk. Set in future tense, the effect is still more powerful. When we draw up blueprints, then share them, we are beginning, already, to lay a foundation. This is because, as Wright (2013: 8) observes, 'beliefs about the limits of social possibility are one of the things that affect what in fact becomes possible'. If we make our social worlds, we also establish the limits of that making through our conceptions of the possible. Thus there's real value in as-if utopianism: We stretch the sense of what feels possible which, in turn, underwrites experimentation and concrete planning.

One big audience for utopian thinking is, of course, the broader scholarly-publishing universe, comprised of funders, scholars, librarians, infrastructure providers, and publishers—the oligopolists included. Together, the members of this world, through their sundry activities, reproduce an unjust system. The scope of what's thinkable in this sphere is established in discourse, through reports, webinars, articles, summits, and manifestos. Calling for a different publishing world has practical, discernible effects, by stretching the boundaries of what the community accepts as legitimate to debate. There is, in other words, a publishing-specific Overton window, an implicit range of acceptable, policy-relevant discourse. Utopian statements, provided that they make the case for viability, can move ideas from the unthinkable to the sensible. In that sense they are space-clearing devices, crucial prefigurations that, in turn, prepare the ground for radical policy shifts. Utopian thinking, paradoxically, helps shape the realpolitik spaces where, one might say, the future is legislated.

Consider the example of the movement for diamond OA journals, against the backdrop of real utopianism. The Latin American system of fee-free publishing existed long before the 'diamond' moniker took root.[v]

In response, initially, to threats posed by the APC system taking root in the Global North, organizations like SciELO, AmeliCA, and Redalyc began to speak and publish about the Latin American model as a viable alternative (e.g., Poynder, 2019; Aguado-López & Becerril-Garcia, 2020). Interviews, joint statements, articles, public talks: These were the discursive seed-beds that, in the second half of the 2010s, made a 'diamond' funding system tractable. Critiques of the author-excluding APC regime, some of them issued from allies beyond the region, were important too (e.g., Tennant, 2018; Muddit, 2019). Discursive space was cleared as a direct consequence.

Diamond open access wrestled its way onto the global scholarly-publishing agenda.

Soon UNESCO (2021) endorsed the model, and the next year the Budapest Open Access Initiative (2022) followed suit—a late correction to the disastrous ambiguity around funding in the original, 2002 Budapest manifesto. Last year's Global Summit on Diamond Open Access in Toluca, Mexico, was a high-profile marker of gathering momentum.[vi] Soon after, Europe's cOAlition S abandoned its APC-friendly stance for a radical, diamond-friendly vision for a 'scholar-led' publishing future.[vii] Post-Summit work to establish regional 'capacity hubs' around the world is now well underway. A diamond future, in short, is possible. What we can't forget is that the mainstreaming of fee-free open access *required,* as a precondition, years of advocacy: critique, for sure, but also story-telling about a viable alternative.

Conclusion

The diamond-OA example illustrates the importance of a big, broad audience for what we should call, unblushingly, progress thinking. At the same time, we are, or should be, speaking to ourselves too. The interstitial work of the radical publishing community needs regular utopian nourishment. We motivate, even animate, our labors when we operate, self-consciously, with imagined, system-wide futures top of mind.[viii]

I want, in closing, to apply the point to the Open Book Collective (OBC), one of the marquee Copim initiatives. The OBC is a matchmaking platform for like-minded funders and publishers (Fathallah & Snyder, 2023; Deville, 2023). It is a marvelous, up-and-running achievement, already helping to sustain more than ten presses and infrastructure providers. But we might also think of the OBC in more utopian terms—as a prototype, an ambitious one, for an alternative, scalable funding system, inclusive of journals and other formats. The OBC's model is portable: We can use it to think the future, to seed a vision for a just, system-wide funding mechanism that charges neither readers nor authors. It is a living, breathing example of a *mission-aligned funding exchange,* an idea first floated by Jack Hyland and colleagues, then refined by Sharla Lair and Rachael Samberg (see Pooley, 2021).

On the OBC model, I am imagining, with utopian flair, a network of funding exchanges, extended to journals and tied to the regional 'capacity hubs' getting built by the diamond OA movement. These exchanges could answer some of the challenges of collective funding

in its current, fragmented form: the burdens of vetting, reporting, and book-keeping, for example. Even the dilemma of free-ridership—the vexing problem of collective action—could be addressed by tiered funding expectations, informed by use metrics but also, crucially, an institution's ability to pay. Governance of these exchanges, again on the OBC model, would encompass the full range of stakeholders (Joy, Adema, & COPIM, 2022).

It's just an idea, but then, that's the whole point. Recall that Richard Poynder, in his (2023: 2) requiem for the OA movement, complained of radicals' 'unrealistic expectations'. Unrealistic? Perhaps, given a rich and wily cartel hellbent on sustaining obscene profit margins. But that's why we should take Poynder's 'unrealistic' as a compliment and rise to its challenge: more progress thinking, more utopian flights, on the realistic assumption that the future is open.

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[i] The 'Overton window' is an idea—developed by U.S. political scientist Joseph Overton—that posits a range of perceived acceptability for policy ideas in everyday politics. The window, crucially, is an object of struggle, subject to widening, narrowing, and other kinds of shifts.

[ii] The 'Copim community' refers to the group that has, among other things, implemented a pair of major grant-funded initiatives: (1) *Community-led Open Publication Infrastructures for Monographs* (COPIM), 2019 – 2023; and (2) *Open Book Futures* (OBF), 2023 – 2026. For an overview, see Barnes (2023) and Adema & Steiner (2023).

[iii] GetFTR is the industry initiative to reduce authentication fatigue among scholars with institutional access, who are asked to enter passwords and two-factor codes to get to paywalled articles. eLife's Michael Eisen (2019), in a Tweet, wrote: 'Need more evidence that major commercial journal publishers are clueless? Their new effort to redirect paper traffic away from free sites to their paywalled ones is called "Get Fatter" (really it's Get FTR, but how else would you pronounce it?)'. eLife is a major nonprofit OA publisher in the life sciences.

[iv] See, for example, a thoughtful essay by Eileen A. Fradenburg Joy and Vincent W. J. van Gerven Oei (2023), the directors of punctum books. They write, citing Fisher's (2009) capitalist realism: 'For us, the rise of small-scale scholar-led OA presses is one such tiny event, one not seeking to overturn platform capitalism but to provide more hospitable conditions for "something else" in a capacity that is manageable precisely because we have no desire, unlike many others

in academic publishing—in both the non-profit and commercial sectors alike—to "scale up"' (Joy & van Gerven Oi, 2023: 5). There is a trace of this opt-out alternativism in Samuel Moore's (2023) recent talk at a conference marking the end of the COPIM project, which calls for 'good closures' against the broader OA movement's dream of seamless interoperability and scale.

[v] There is a large literature on the Latin American tradition of fee-free open access publishing. See, e.g., Alperin (2015), Alperin et al. (2023), Babini (2020), and Costa & Leite (2016).

[vi] The 'Manifesto on Science as Global Public Good: Noncommercial Open Access' (2023) signed after the Summit is itself a paragon of utopian thinking, in the 'real' sense that Erik Olin Wright proposed.

[vii] The new Plan S blueprint, 'Toward Responsible Publishing' (cOAlition S, 2023), largely mimicked the Council of Europe's (2023) call for a revamped publishing system. Both bear strong resemblances to a scheme to re-classify publishers as competing service providers, a scheme advanced—in what once seemed a quixotic campaign—by Björn Brembs (Brembs et al., 2023), the German neuroscientist. Real utopianism in action (see Pooley, 2023).

[viii] Janneke Adema and Samuel Moore (2024), in a beautiful example of real utopian thinking, have recently called for universities to recognize, value, and allot time for scholarly publishing work—setting aside, say, one day a week for such labor. They position their idea as a 'utopian demand', borrowing the idea from women's studies scholar Kathi Weeks (2011). Glossing Weeks, Adema and Moore argue that a utopian demand 'asks us to imagine alternative futures for work, while at the same time being performative, where the demand itself prefigures a different world' (Adema & Moore, 2024: 25).