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Mind the Gap and POP!: In Conversation with John Maxwell

by Caroline Winter | 17 July 2020 | English, Observations, Observations and Responses | 0 comments



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This observation was written by Caroline Winter, with thanks to John Maxwell for his feedback and contributions.

At a glance:

Title	<i>Mind the Gap and POP!</i>
Creator	John Maxwell
Publication Date	2019
Keywords	INKE partner activities, open source software, scholarly communication

In August 2019, John Maxwell and a team of authors with the [Canadian Institute for Studies in Publishing](#) at Simon Fraser University (SFU) published a report called *Mind the Gap: A Landscape Analysis of Open Source Publishing Tools and Platforms* (2019). Complementing Educopia's *Mapping the Scholarly Communication Landscape 2019 Census* released in June 2019, the report inventories open source publishing software and the system of community infrastructure to which it belongs (Maxwell et al. 2019, p. 1–2).

The report offers a snapshot of the current open source publishing software landscape and reveals significant gaps in the infrastructure: although there are many open source publishing tools available,

they tend to be small in scale and designed to meet the specific needs of their creators, so their marketability is limited (Maxwell 2019).

The report argues that open source software, in which source code is openly available online and licensed so that it can be used, shared, and modified freely (Open Source Initiative n.d.), is an integral component of the open scholarship ecosystem (Maxwell et al. 2019). Open access (OA), it contends, is undermined by commercial infrastructures (Maxwell et al. 2019).

Mind the Gap and the INKE Partnership

The report is a valuable resource for INKE members and other researchers interested in new knowledge environments. Maxwell, himself a member of INKE, discusses the relevance of *Mind the Gap* and another of his projects—the journal *POP!*—in the interview the follows.

Responses to *Mind the Gap* from the Academic Community

The report was announced in the academic press, including in *MIT News* and *Library Journal* infoDocket, and is included in the [resource collection](#) of France's *Ouvrir La Science* committee.

A notice about the report's publication in *Inside Higher Ed* highlights its discussion of the challenges that many of the tools and platforms face in terms of sustainability (McKenzie 2019), as does a review of the report on *The Scholarly Kitchen* (Schonfeld 2019). This review notes that the report makes important contributions to understanding the digital scholarly publishing marketplace, including its analysis of the open source publishing community and the tension between collaboration and centralization of publishing infrastructure (Schonfeld 2019).

Mind The Gap's publication on PubPub, an open-source collaborative publishing platform, enables an ongoing discussion of the report among its readers. Some points raised in this discussion so far include whether open source and commercial publishing software can be used together effectively, how functions and features are understood and defined, and mentions of other platforms and tools that was not discussed in the report.

Mind the Gap and Open Scholarship

Schonfeld situates *Mind the Gap* within discussions about the role of open source software in scholarly publishing and research infrastructure, the cycle of innovation and consolidation, and the challenge of maintaining and sustaining infrastructure, noting that the report raises questions about the scholarly publishing landscape as a whole and its ongoing transformation (2019).

In Conversation with John Maxwell

In the fall of 2019, John Maxwell launched a new, open access, interdisciplinary journal called *POP!*, published at SFU by the Canadian Institute for Studies in Publishing with support from SFU and INKE. The [inaugural issue](#), edited by INKE members Alyssa Arbuckle, Luis Meneses, and Ray Siemens, features proceedings from the [January 2019 INKE Gathering in Victoria: Understanding and Enacting Open Scholarship](#), and Maxwell discussed the journal and its manifesto at the [2020 INKE Gathering in Victoria](#).

The Open Scholarship Policy Observatory recently spoke with Maxwell about *Mind the Gap* and *POP!* in relation to open scholarship.

Open Scholarship Policy Observatory: Could you tell us about your current role at SFU and the work you're doing related to open scholarship?

John Maxwell: I'm a faculty member and outgoing Director of [Publishing Studies](#) at SFU. Publishing Studies programs are fairly common in Europe, South America, and Asia, but they're rare in North America: ours is the only program in Canada doing research about publishing, including open scholarship. Our faculty includes [Juan Pablo Alperin](#), the Associate Director of Research at the Public Knowledge Project,

and [Hannah McGregor](#), whose work focuses on scholarly podcasting. My work is about the evolution of academic publishing and the scholarly book.

OSPO: Could you also tell us a bit about your involvement with INKE?

JM: I've been involved with INKE for many years and have seen it evolve in the direction of open social scholarship, and I think a lot about how publishing fits in. I'm particularly interested in how digital humanists interact with each other and with born digital and born open materials. I've collaborated with other INKE members, including Alyssa, to think about how we can build community infrastructure within INKE itself, and how we can continue to collaborate throughout the year, not just at our yearly gathering.

OSPO: Last summer, you authored a report called [Mind the Gap](#), surveying the landscape of open publishing tools and platforms. What were some of your key findings?

JM: This report was published by [MIT Press](#) and funded by the [Andrew W. Mellon Foundation](#), which is a primary funder of innovation in scholarly communications, such as open monographs and the rise of library publishing. The report focuses on infrastructure: what tools and platforms are available that support open publishing, including but not exclusively related to open access? So it's essentially an inventory. Some of the tools and platforms listed are well known, like [Open Journal Systems \(OJS\)](#), and some are projects coming out of the Mellon foundation, like [Manifold](#), [Fulcrum](#), and the [University of California Press](#)' and [Coko Foundation's Editoria](#).

We found about 55 projects that fit our criteria of being active (and actively maintained) and viable. Our key finding is that all these tools have a sustainability problem. OJS, for example, supports 10,000 journals worldwide, but even it still struggles to receive stable funding; it's funded through grants, with some income from publishing services. If this is the case for OJS, how will any of these tools be able to survive in the long term? A related problem is that grant money is competitive, so these open publishing projects are competing against each other for funding as well as for interest and uptake.

OSPO: What effect has the report had on the open scholarship community?

JM: The report has helped open up a dialogue about how we can create incentives for projects to interoperate rather than compete, and collaboration is being taken more seriously now. This was one of the first landscape surveys of the open publishing field, but there are now others. These inventories encourage us to look at the scholarly publishing ecosystem as a whole in order to think about how it might be restructured.

So the report is part of a larger conversation about the landscape of open publishing and scholarly communication. This includes the role of funders. For example, what if the Mellon Foundation provided long-term funding rather than seed funding? The research funding model tends to prioritize innovation, but maybe we should prioritize sustainability instead.

OSPO: How has the landscape changed over the past year?

JM: There seems to be a growing sense of community mindedness, such as in Kathleen Fitzpatrick's keynote for [OA20: Collaborative Software Communities: Sustainability, Solidarity, and the Common Good](#). How can we move away from the market-driven competitive model we have now towards a more collaborative model?

OSPO: Last fall, you launched the open access, interdisciplinary journal *POP!* Could you tell us about the journal and its [manifesto](#)? What does it mean to emphasize care in scholarly publishing?

JM: With *POP!*, our focus is on *publication* rather than *publishing*—the gathering of the public around a work or an idea. Scholarly publishing tends to care a lot about metrics and algorithms but less about the act of reading and reading communities. *POP!* offers another way of reading scholarship—particularly

humanities scholarship. We asked, what if we did it differently? What if we made a journal that prioritized reading, sort of like a collectible magazine, and distributed it at events where our reading communities were already gathering together? We had plans to distribute the print edition at [DHSI 2020](#) at the 2021 INKE gathering. The pandemic, of course, interrupted this plan, but we'll circle back to it when we're able to.

The irony of OA is that, even though the idea is that everyone can read OA publications online, that doesn't mean readers will see these works or want to read them. Print is interesting because it has circulation figures—how many copies are released and acquired—as well as readership figures—how many people actually read it. Readership is often a multiple of circulation, since one person might read a print text then pass it on to a friend or two. We envision *POP!* as something you might find in waiting room—not at a dentist's office, perhaps, but certainly in a dean's office or a grad student lounge—and engage with as a reader. You can engage communities of readers differently in print than you can online and on social media.

OSPO: *Pop!* is published by the Canadian Institute for Studies in Publishing. How does it align with your work in the SFU publishing program and with Canadian publishing more generally?

JM: One of the challenges with this journal has been how to do it sustainably on a very small scale. To do this, we leverage SFU's Publishing Studies program and, well, "exploit" people's goodwill and interest in publishing research. The Institute has been thinking for a long time about the possibility of running a press—we used to for textbook-like publications, but not for the last decade.

CISP is a kind of working lab, and a teaching lab, so producing a publication like *POP!* provides opportunities for students to apply what they're learning before entering the Canadian publishing community. We're also able to draw on faculty expertise and put it into practice. So far, we've hired some students and faculty for copyediting, and eventually we'd like the journal's print and design to be done by students, directed by faculty.

OSPO: How does *POP!* fit into the scholarly communication landscape, particularly in terms of open scholarship?

JM: It's something of an experiment, an intervention, and an opportunity to ask questions like, what if we did things differently? What if we worked against the idea of big scale, of algorithms, and instead created something handcrafted in small batches? Would this matter to people? What would happen? And how does this expand our idea of what open social scholarship can be? Open social scholarship often assumes online publication, but print circulation expands this idea in a different direction, and it might even reach broader audience. We left behind something valuable when we left print behind, but it's something we can go back for without losing the benefits of online OA.

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