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Caring for Scholarly Knowledge: Multiscalar Challenges for a Values- Based Knowledge Commons

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Abstract

This paper addresses the processes of the scholarly publishing system transitioning to Open Access in the context of a value-based knowledge commons and discusses the associated challenges for collective action. The idea of a value-based knowledge commons is situated in the context of an unequal distribution of knowledge and correspondingly available resources (e.g., time, labor). The call for orienting towards care ethics (Tronto, 1993) is linked to a demand for a more inclusive and equitable publication system. Its implementation requires multiscalar collaboration, resource allocation, and knowledge exchange among different actors. Using the example of non-commercial publishing initiatives, I critically engage with and discuss the perspectives and challenges of commoning (De Angelis, 2017; Gibson-Graham et al., 2016) and care, based on 24 qualitative interviews with representatives of scholar-led publishing initiatives, librarians, and international experts.

Keywords ethics of care, open access, knowledge commons, scholarly publishing

1. Introduction

The landscape of academic publishing is shaped by a fundamental tension between the pursuit of knowledge and the demands of commercial markets. Historically, publishing served as a communal enterprise aimed at advancing scholarship, yet it has become increasingly entangled with market-driven logics that prioritize profit, efficiency, and scalability. This shift has led to the dominance of large commercial publishers, whose control over scholarly communication has reinforced exploitative labor practices and restricted access to knowledge. In response, scholar-led pub-

lishing initiatives have emerged as a challenge to this system, advocating for alternative models that center care, collaboration, and the ethical dimensions of publishing.

Since the publication of the first scientific journal (Fyfe et al., 2022, p. 19), scholarly publishing has undergone numerous transformations—including division of labor, metricization, and automation—all reinforcing the accumulation of capital and consolidating power within a handful of commercial entities (Fyfe et al., 2022). Today, academic publishing operates within a regime of calculation that mirrors broader

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trends in higher education, where excellence is often equated with numerical outputs (Readings, 1997, pp. 21–42). The dominant metric of care in this system revolves around numbers: high-impact factors, citation counts, and altmetrics scores. In this structure, scalability becomes a central objective, privileging standardized, profit-driven outputs while marginalizing the labor that sustains scholarly communication (Tsing, 2015, p. 110).

A critical consequence of this system is its pervasive lack of care. The calculative logic of commercial publishing frequently disregards the well-being of authors (Bauder & Engel-Di Mauro, 2008, pp. 733–734), editors (O’Loughlin & Sidaway, 2020, p. 7), reviewers (Tennant, 2020), copyeditors, and other essential contributors. This lack of care manifests in exploitative labor practices, where commercial publishers extract surplus value from unpaid academic labor (Pooley, 2022, p. 3; Tennant, 2020). The concept of care, which originates from feminist critiques of invisible and often feminized labor, is crucial in exposing and addressing these inequalities. In scholarly publishing, care is not merely an ethical principle but a necessary counterforce to the depersonalizing effects of commercial logics.

The ethics of care has been increasingly recognized as a vital framework for rethinking academic publishing (Adema, 2019, pp. 74–77; Adema & Moore, 2018, p. 8; Bradley, 2021; Joy, 2020; Lawson, 2018). The Radical Open Access Collective (ROAC) catalyzed a significant discussion on this topic by convening a conference in 2018 and publishing proceedings dedicated to care (e.g., Adema et al., 2018; Albornoz et al., 2018; Allen et al., 2018; Deville et al., 2018; Fragnito et al., 2018). These contributions foreground the labor, relationalities, and ethical commitments that sustain publishing processes—elements that are often made invisible in commercial models. The collective studied, an international association of around 70 publication initiatives founded 10 years ago, forms multiscalar networks to fight together for a fairer and more inclusive publishing system.

Beyond advocating for equity and justice, scholarly initiatives position themselves as a challenge to the monopolization and homogenization of academic knowledge (Adema & Moore, 2021, pp. 28, 38). In the wake of increasing platformization (Eve & Lockett, 2021, p. 67), these initiatives propose alternative infrastructures that emphasize diversity and resilience.

Care, in this context, becomes a foundational principle for reconnecting the fragmented units of scholarly publishing. It fosters collaborative environments where labor is acknowledged, relationality is valued, and publishing is reimagined as a form of commoning (Federici, 2019, p. 163; Zechner et al., 2021, pp. 33–51).

By positioning scholarly publishing as a knowledge commons, the ethics of care offers a crucial perspective for reshaping the system. It highlights the interdependencies and labor investments that sustain knowledge production, advocating for practices that move beyond extractive and profit-driven models toward more equitable and sustainable alternatives. Accordingly, this paper focuses on two main research questions:

- I. How do members of the ROAC envision a care-based knowledge commons and its processes?
- II. What are the main challenges in a global collective action towards Open Access to knowledge?

2. Ethics of Care, Commoning, and Scholarly Publishing

The concepts of commons and knowledge commons are related but distinct notions that warrant careful examination. The term *commons* generally refers to a shared resource accessible to a community of users, where individuals have specific rights and obligations in relation to its usage and management (Ostrom, 2010). In contrast, *knowledge commons* focuses on the collective governance and sharing of intellectual resources, such as scientific data, cultural artifacts, and creative works (Hess & Ostrom, 2007). While traditional commons are typically associated with physical, tangible resources like land or water, knowledge commons pertain to intangible, informational resources. Consequently, their governance involves additional complexities, including intellectual property rights, data privacy, and mechanisms for fostering collaboration and equitable access (Moore, 2019).

The shift towards digital knowledge dissemination, particularly in the context of Open Access (OA), has sparked debates over the sustainability and inclusivity of knowledge commons. Madison (2021, p. 152) describes it as a “Scientific Knowledge Commons,” highlighting the historical precedence of collective scholarly engagement in comparison to the “Republic of Letters.” Digital technologies have accelerated

global access to knowledge (Chan et al., 2002), yet they have also necessitated the renegotiation of traditional scholarly publishing models. Ostrom's (1990) governance framework provided a foundational approach for adapting commons-based models to knowledge management. Hess and Ostrom (2007) were among the first to apply commons perspectives to knowledge, acknowledging both its non-subtractable nature and governance challenges. However, liberal commons perspectives predominantly focus on demand-side accessibility while often neglecting restrictions on the supply side, which continue to exclude many potential contributors.

From a liberal standpoint, knowledge is viewed as a non-subtractable good, best managed through sustainable collective governance. However, the production and dissemination of knowledge are embedded in socio-technical dependencies, requiring financial, infrastructural, and human resources. While digital technologies have enhanced accessibility through the internet, computing devices, and discovery systems, significant barriers remain on the supply side. Funding, labor, and institutional support are crucial for sustaining knowledge production. Unequal access to these resources exacerbates disparities in knowledge production and participation, highlighting the limitations of liberal perspectives on commons governance.

Critics argue that liberal commons frameworks insufficiently account for external economic constraints, particularly those imposed by capitalism and market-driven enclosures (De Angelis, 2017, p. 170). Ostrom's framework assumes that commons governance is endogenously driven, relying on internal management principles. However, commons systems are frequently shaped by broader socio-economic forces that threaten their sustainability. De Angelis (2017) highlights the persistent risks of enclosure and co-optation under capitalist logics of accumulation. Similarly, Harvey (2011, p. 103) challenges the liberal abstraction of "natural resources," emphasizing that all resources are socially defined and entangled with economic, technological, and cultural dimensions. Harvey also critiques the "scale problem" in liberal commons theories, arguing that translating local governance models to global knowledge systems requires acknowledging hierarchical power structures (Harvey, 2011, pp. 101–102).

In response, critical scholars advocate for an approach that conceptualizes commons as dynamic social rela-

tions rather than static resource pools. Linebaugh (2008) emphasizes the labor and social activities involved in sustaining commons, a perspective echoed by De Angelis (2017, p. 271) in his concept of commoning, which refers to the cooperative labor and social practices that continuously (re)produce commons. The idea of boundary commoning—the structured interaction between different commons systems—offers a transformative potential for fostering interdependent knowledge networks (De Angelis, 2017, pp. 287, 291).

Building on critical perspectives, feminist scholars introduce the ethico-political dimension of care into knowledge commons governance. Federici (2019, pp. 93–96) and Caffentzis argue that commoning is inherently a process of social reproduction, structured around solidarity and mutual sharing. Commoning requires active social relations that involve cooperation, subjectification, and responsibilities toward both human and nonhuman actors (Federici, 2019, p. 110). This perspective challenges dominant economic models, asserting that capitalist exploitation of reproductive labor is integral to accumulation, yet alternative modes of organization such as "commoning care" offer resistance through collective action.

Tronto (1998) provides a framework for understanding care as both a disposition and a structured practice, consisting of four phases: attentiveness to needs, responsibility for organizing resources, performance of caregiving tasks, and responsiveness to care received (Tronto, 1998, pp. 16, 19). Within scholarly publishing, this framework underscores the invisible labor sustaining knowledge infrastructures, including maintenance, repair, and digital stewardship. Recognizing care in scholarly publishing highlights the relational and material conditions required for equitable knowledge production and access.

By integrating care into knowledge commons governance, scholars challenge profit-driven publishing models and advocate for more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable knowledge infrastructures. Federici (2019, p. 104) emphasizes that care and commoning are co-constitutive, suggesting that reclaiming and restructuring knowledge production around care principles could offer pathways beyond capitalist constraints.

The governance of knowledge commons extends beyond liberal frameworks of accessibility, demanding

an approach that acknowledges economic structures, labor relations, and the ethics of care. While digital technologies and OA initiatives have transformed knowledge dissemination, they have not eliminated structural inequalities in knowledge production. Critical perspectives emphasize the ongoing struggles against enclosure, power asymmetries, and exclusion, while feminist interventions foreground the role of care and social reproduction in sustaining knowledge commons. Ultimately, a transformative approach to knowledge governance requires recognizing the interdependence of resources, labor, and ethics in shaping equitable and sustainable knowledge commons.

3. Methods

This study builds on qualitative interviews with 24 experts in the field of scholarly communication (i.e., librarians, OA advocates, scholarly communication professionals, and technical experts) and key stakeholders representing members of scholar-led presses conducted between March 2021 and September 2022. The sample included 17 male and seven female participants, of whom 10 were based in the United Kingdom, five in other European countries, six in the United States, and three in countries outside these regions. The interviews were conducted online, and their length ranged from 90 to 120 minutes. The study was preceded by mixed methods research on sociospatial strategies of scholar-led publishing initiatives participating in the ROAC (Schimmel, 2023). One of the interviews was conducted with two experts, as they were both colleagues as co-founders of meson press and have offered this interview constellation. Additionally, I have conducted two interviews with one expert for purposes of validation and completion of research questions. During the interviews, I showed a network map created with data based on web-based research (Schimmel, 2023) and used visualization as an elicitation method. Furthermore, the interview guideline also included questions on professional networks and their recent evolutions. The interviews were then analyzed according to Mayring (2014) and Gläser and Laudel (2010) in light of Tronto's framework of care.

Due to the study's focus on a specific group of stakeholders in scholarly publishing, the results may have regional and discipline-specific biases and thus cannot be generalized. As the research subjects are embedded within specific regions, except for some interviewees, the findings are inevitably shaped by these

situational contexts. Beyond that, this article largely draws on privileged scholarly formations, which reflects existing inequalities in global scholarly communication. While the sampling strategy deliberately sought to include a range of perspectives, it must be acknowledged that this diversity remains partial and framed by the structural asymmetries of the field itself.

4. Multiscalar Challenges for a Values-Based Knowledge Commons

4.1 Envisioning a Scholarly Knowledge Commons

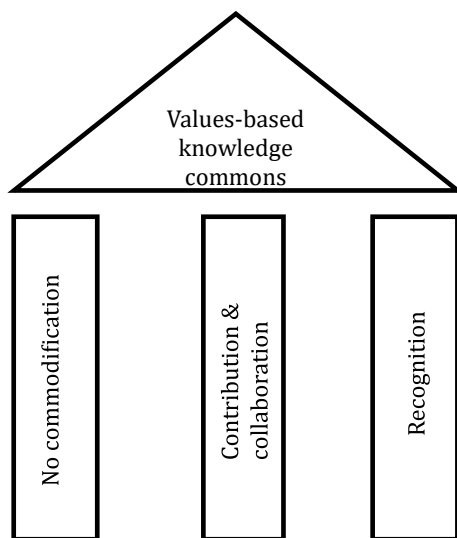
Building on the methodological approach outlined in the previous section, the following presents key findings from the qualitative interviews. Participants critically examined the conditions of scholarly publishing through the lens of care ethics, highlighting both structural challenges and collective efforts to foster a more sustainable and inclusive knowledge commons.

The interview partners critically reflected on the existing conditions and social relations in scholarly publishing, particularly the often-invisible care work that sustains the system while serving the logics of capital accumulation. Many interviewees expressed a strong moral obligation to acknowledge and support these invisible contributions. Furthermore, they highlighted how homogenizing tendencies in publishing pose a threat to diversity, leading to ethical commitments aimed at maintaining a more inclusive knowledge commons.

From these perspectives, a care-ethical approach informs a values-based knowledge commons built on three key pillars: (1) rejecting commodification, (2) recognizing all forms of scholarly labor, and (3) fostering collaboration and an ethics of contribution (see Figure 1). Participants emphasized that care and commons are deeply interconnected but remain undervalued in dominant publishing structures (Samuel Moore, personal communication, April 22, 2022). Drawing on feminist critiques of capitalism (see Federici, 2019), they viewed the ethics of care as an alternative to hierarchical, rule-based commons models. Instead of rigid governance mechanisms, a resilient commons prioritizes relationships, shared labor, and collective responsibility.

One of the things we did early in our thinking was thinking what other resources can we bring into our publishing work that might help us, and I think you probably know, we thought about this notion of “care.” ... for us it was helpful what forms of relationality are being composed by our interventions into academic publishing. And thinking about where the notion like “care” can help you think about the ethics or somebody’s forms of relationality can be helpful. And again, I think, it is itself a similar way to “open.” (Joe Deville, personal communication, March 24, 2021)

Figure 1 The Three Basic Pillars of a Values-Based Knowledge Commons According to Interviewed Scholar-Led Publishers.



Note. Source: Own elaboration.

The second pillar—contribution & collaboration—emphasizes care as an immanent value within the academic community. Participants described care not only as a moral stance but as an active practice of mutual support, which counters the competitive pressures of academia (e.g., anonymous interviewee, personal communication, February 14, 2022). This includes taking responsibility for the relationships embedded in publishing processes and fostering non-hierarchical, collaborative environments where both individuals and small entities have agency. In this sense, care sustains the knowledge commons by ensuring that contributions are valued beyond quantifiable metrics (e.g., Eileen Joy, personal communication, April 9, 2021). Scholar-led publishing initiatives particularly emphasize the third pillar: re-centering care by recognizing the labor, emotions, and time invested in knowledge

production. Interviewees highlighted that this requires moving beyond a purely output-driven system toward a model that values *gifted care*—care-driven contributions tailored to specific intellectual needs rather than standardized, scalable outputs. However, this shift comes with self-imposed limitations, particularly regarding scalability. As several participants noted, scaling up often contradicts the ethical commitments of scholar-led initiatives. Instead, they advocate for *scaling small* (Adema & Moore, 2021) as a way to preserve care-centered practices while maintaining sustainability within a competitive publishing landscape (Martin Eve, personal communication, May 18, 2021; Rupert Gatti, personal communication, March 29, 2021; Gary Hall, personal communication, August 5, 2022).

This self-limitation, however, introduces vulnerabilities. As scholar-led publishers remain relatively small, many interviewees emphasized the need for cooperation to share resources, reduce risks, and foster resilience. Trust and shared values become crucial in this process, positioning the knowledge commons not just as a repository of shared resources but as a fundamentally care-based mode of production. Ultimately, this perspective underscores the necessity of networking across communities, reinforcing care work as central to the future of scholarly publishing.

While these findings illustrate how care-ethical approaches shape scholar-led publishing initiatives, they also highlight the challenges of sustaining such practices within a system dominated by market-driven imperatives. To further explore these tensions, the next section engages with Tronto’s care framework, offering a critical reflection on the structural and ethical challenges of centering care in scholarly publishing.

4.2 Reflecting Challenges of Care-Ethical Approaches With Tronto’s Care Framework

Against the background of scholarly publishing involving many different stakeholders, considering care as a core value entails a high complexity. As regards Tronto’s framework, this section will dive deeper into the various roles and the negotiation processes in scholarly publishing. Accordingly, the four phases of care relate to specific hierarchies in that Tronto observes rather clear delineations between the privileged, who are assigned to the first two phases of care,

and the less-privileged, who are usually left with the last two phases (Tronto, 1993, p. 114).

Although scholarly publishing is an area within academia that reinforces inequalities within whole societies and is inherently unequal (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970/2000; Kromydas, 2017, pp. 6–7; UNESCO & Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2021; Watkins, 2020), there are claims for a stronger recognition of care involved in scholarly publishing. For instance, van Gerwen Oei (personal communication, April 21, 2021) from punctum books strongly argues for providing free education for all as a precursor to making knowledge commons a reality. In that regard, punctum books notably serves marginalized parts of the (para-) academic community and self-identifies as an activist towards more equity, diversity, and open accessibility of knowledge. Moreover, punctum books provides an example of attentiveness to care that is needed on various scales, representing other scholar-led publishing initiatives.

4.2.1 Phase One: Caring About

At first sight, scholars with publishing experience seem to be exceptionally attentive to what kind of care is needed. Yet there is no direct connection between a specific status within academia and the subjective-related attentiveness towards caring about. Witness the numerous OA presses and journals founded by early career researchers and students, such as Dotawo¹, Mattering Press², Kyngervi³, On_Culture⁴, and Soapbox⁵, to name just a few. In that regard, such publishing initiatives represent a form of “care for the self” (Foucault, 1984/1986, p. 43), as they provide scholarly environments for publishing activities that might struggle with the current structures for sharing knowledge with the broader (academic) community.

4.2.2 Phase Two: Caring For

Beyond that, taking responsibility as the second phase of care is no less complex and involves many different actors in relation to various facets. With regards to the studied scholar-led publishing initiatives, their possibility of taking responsibility to facilitate care work in scholarly publishing is rather limited. According to Tronto, it entails the allocation and organization of resources that may induce further caring processes. In the context of small-scaled activities, founding and running

an OA journal requires such measures. Thus, it is a form of taking responsibility, which may then extend according to an increase in prestige. Take, for instance, scholar-led presses such as Open Book Publishers (OBP) and Open Humanities Press (OHP) that were founded in the mid-2000s by scholars who have already earned certain statuses in their fields and have established scholarly networks throughout their careers.

According to the co-founder of OBP, the privilege of being embedded in scholarly networks formed around Cambridge was significant in taking responsibility in scholarly publishing:

Both of us were academics ..., I'm a fellow of the Trinity College Cambridge. That gives me a pretty phenomenal network of academics. You name pretty much any subject and I've got a friend who is a world expert in that area. And so, there's not many people with that sort of social network. Similarly, Alessandra [Tosi], ... she spent a lot of time in Cambridge, she had lot of Cambridge connections as well. And so, it was that Cambridge connection where we realized we're in a position where we can do something here. (Rupert Gatti, personal communication, March 29, 2021)

By reflecting on their own positionality in academia, the co-founders anticipated potential in being embedded in these exclusive networks, which can benefit a broader community. Hence, setting up an OA monograph press is a complex undertaking, facing enormous competition and satisfying the expectations of prestige-based academia. In that regard, Gatti implies that prestige is associated with building trust facilitated via scholarly networks. What is more, the existing networks functioned as a motivational thrust that connected the possibilities of action with an urge to take responsibility. What followed then was the allocation of resources to initiate a process of changing structures in scholarly publishing by investing in the free accessibility of scholarly knowledge (Rupert Gatti, personal communication, March 29, 2021).

Beyond that, Gary Hall, as the co-founder of OHP, illustrates the challenging path of establishing a scholar-led press as a caring practice that is mostly not attributed as much recognition as other academic work. Based on his own experience, the mechanisms of recognition in academia associated with the neoliberal university largely facilitate virulent carelessness in scholarly publishing. Consequently, he claims that by

setting up networks and relationships of care, the observed carelessness may be changed for the greater good (Gary Hall, personal communication, August 5, 2022). By stressing subject-related possibilities for establishing relationships of care, it fosters an ethic of contribution as a pillar of the envisioned knowledge commons.

Moreover, the claim for changing structures of recognition implies certain vulnerabilities and dependencies that exist. In light of the envisioned knowledge commons, it addresses the reward structures that tend to separate individuals into tangible units and are therefore opposed to logics of care (Mol, 2008, pp. 3–5). Beyond that, the criticism toward current reward structures also comprises dissent with inequalities in academic knowledge production. Addressing the flawed structures in academia discloses the vulnerabilities of stakeholders in scholarly publishing, as, for instance, care-ethical publishers and scholars are unable to change established structures themselves. As a care-ethical approach entails a not-for-profit ethos, the allocation of resources refers to a dependency on policymakers, academic institutions, and funders that claim to foster academic freedom. In that regard, academic freedom can only be assured by advocating for diversity, equity, and inclusion, which requires a collective struggle (Joy, 2020, pp. 318–323). Following Tronto's framework of care, taking responsibility as not-for-profit publishers encompasses collaborating with universities, libraries, and funders to allocate necessary resources to make care work happen. They argue for publishing to be recognized as a professional craft that involves labor, technologies, and specific knowledge infrastructures that need to be set up and maintained.

Taking into consideration universities' current roles as institutionalized knowledge production plants and their subjugation under a regime of technological capitalism suggests that "caring for" is indeed assigned to the powerful to some extent. In demanding a stronger involvement of academic institutions, scholar-led presses often face challenges associated with patriarchal and capitalist structures. Largely, senior management at universities and libraries is still male-/white-dominated (O'Connor, 2019), and the structures of research assessment and management (Wilsdon et al., 2015, p. 71) reinforce or stabilize the current system of scholarly publishing. In most cases, decisions about resource allocation are dependent on the source of funds. As, for instance, in most European

countries, impact factors and publication output dominate research assessment (Demmy Verbeke, personal communication, February 15, 2022).

Moreover, the amount of library budgetary expenses for not-for-profit and scholar-led presses is still marginal in the US, the European Union, and the United Kingdom (Sharla Lair, personal communication, April 29, 2022; Anonymous librarian, personal communication, February 1, 2022; Lidia Uziel, personal communication, February 23, 2022). As regards potential support from libraries, it strongly depends upon strategic visions and mission statements. Apart from that, corporate publishers have created strong dependencies, so that academic institutions have mostly lost control over addressing the demand side. In that regard, it is the responsibility of decision-makers within academic institutions to ensure academic freedom, which is largely threatened by the oligopolistic structures in scholarly publishing. But, as Verbeke also emphasizes as head librarian of KU Leuven library, it is conceivable to take responsibility and allocate resources to make care work happen (Demmy Verbeke, personal communication, February 15, 2022).

Because if we have money for big deals for read-and-publish, for so-called transformative agreements, we in Leuven give €1,600,000 a year to Elsevier, do not come and tell me we cannot find € 2,000 for one of these presses. It is just a matter of making sure that you shield off part of the budget, and I think that is the thing. One challenge is you need to be sure that not all of the budget is hoovered up by the big publishers, and the way we do it in Leuven is just by making very sure we just set aside part of our budget to say this needs to be exclusively spent on non-profit stuff just to prevent it from all the budget being hoovered up by our big deals. (Demmy Verbeke, personal communication, February 15, 2022)

On much broader scales, the possibilities for senior management in academic institutions to take responsibility seem to be limited in light of recent mandates in relation to OA policies. As Moore (2019, pp. 83–110, 2021, pp. 1522–1523) observes, the policy mandates merely distinguish between open and closed access business models without considering the complexity and the profit-driven structure of scholarly publishing. Against this backdrop, Babini comments on the recent OA policies in Europe as being predominantly profit-driven, focusing on the support of commercial

businesses rather than facilitating inclusivity, diversity, equity, and accessibility (Dominique Babini, personal communication, March 30, 2022). In that regard, policymakers mainly seem to care for an industry-based system of scholarly publishing, which in the end is ignorant toward the root causes of the manifold problems addressed by stakeholders that care for “bibliodiversity” (Barnes & Gatti, 2019; Berger, 2021; Giménez Toledo et al., 2019; Mounier, 2018; Ryan, 2022; Shearer & Becerril-García, 2021; Shearer et al., 2020). If policies regarding market regulations in scholarly communication are driven by neoliberal agendas (Adema, 2021, pp. 23–26), re-distributing resources from the bottom to the top, scholar-led publishing initiatives are forced to practice self-care. The latter entails collaborating, sharing, collectively advocating, raising awareness, and providing alternatives across different communities in scholarly publishing.

Setting up mutual relationships and sharing resources by creating networks (of care) enables each entity to pool its resources and collectively take responsibility. As the formation around scholar-led presses shows, the diversity of the ROAC facilitated a process of collaboration among like-minded presses. Driven by a motive to share knowledge, infrastructure, and software as OA book publishers, they applied for an initial funding to identify possibilities and alternative ways of publishing OA monographs (Rupert Gatti, personal communication, March 29, 2021). This, in turn, increased collaboration among scholar-led presses, which then proved to be advantageous for gathering resources that facilitated their will to “care for” in scholarly publishing.

4.2.3 Phases Three and Four: Caregiving and Care-Receiving

Beyond that, the third phase of care refers to caregiving, which requires specific knowledge about how to care. Hence, these processes imply relations to care-receiving entities, whereas some caring roles in scholarly publishing overlap, the third and fourth phases of care will be covered in a combined analysis. With regard to the processes of scholarly publishing from the perspective of scholar-led activists, I will look more deeply into three areas that need care and represent different scales.

4.2.3.1 Researchers and Authors

Giving care to researchers and authors entails many different processes that require specific knowledge, empathy, trust, transparency, and close collaboration. Regarding this, giving care to each individual in publishing processes highlights the smallest units in production (Eileen Joy, personal communication, April 9, 2021). By considering monographs as “emotionally invested objects,” scholar-led presses foregrounding care acknowledge academic labor, build trust, and foster collaborative environments. For instance, editing and typesetting manuscripts as a scholar-led press can be a form of care-giving (Vincent van Gerven Oei, personal communication, April 21, 2021).

Moreover, as giving care toward authors entails a concept of providing affordable publishing options, scholar-led presses usually operate on a not-for-profit basis, in avoidance of charging fees wherever it is conceivable (Janneke Adema, personal communication, May 4, 2022; Martin Eve, personal communication, May 18, 2021; Rupert Gatti, personal communication, March 29, 2021). In some cases, where publishing cultures and scholarly funding infrastructures may be obstructive to revenue models without charging author fees, fair pricing with a focus on affordability and transparency is carefully implemented (Andreas Kirchner and Marcus Burkhardt, personal communication, May 20, 2021; Francois van Schalkwyk, personal communication, January 18, 2022).

Beyond that, caregiving implicitly addresses responsibilities of researchers. With reference to an ethic of contribution, some directly claim an author’s choice of where to give their own labor. As scholars, they call on their peers not to publish with for-profit presses as a contribution to the scholarly knowledge commons. In that context, choosing to adopt the idea of “collective responsibility” is positively recognized among the community members and shapes the community’s identity (Rupert Gatti, personal communication, March 29, 2021). This idea embraces gift giving as an ideal of the envisioned knowledge commons. However, this claim requires balancing the ideal with real structures in scholarly publishing. In recognition of different dependencies with regard to the relations of an individual’s possibilities for action, expecting to gift labor cannot be considered a universal ethic. Gifting labor as a caring practice in scholarly publishing often relates to certain positions that allow this kind of caregiving. This again touches on the immanent concept of care as opposed to many other West-

ern ethical logics (see Tronto, 1993, p. 153). Beyond the practice of publishing their own work, scholars can make contributions at all stages, such as gifting labor for peer review and care work for different communities (Gary Hall, personal communication, August 5, 2022). In addition, one implicit caregiving practice by scholar-led presses towards researchers is their focus on collaboration rather than competition (e.g., Joe Deville, personal communication, March 24, 2021) to maintain “bibliodiversity” (Barnes & Gatti, 2019). Thus, caring for this diversity is referred to as contributing to academic freedom (Rupert Gatti, personal communication, March 29, 2021).

What is more, some co-founders of scholar-led presses implicitly reflect on forms of care towards scholars as an intrinsic motivation to establish a scholar-led press. Becoming aware of the homogenizing structures in scholarly publishing initially created a process of self-identification as a press that offers opportunities for fostering experiments.

It’s about work that’s experimental in form, experimental in voice, and maybe doing disciplinary mashups that are really unusual, that no one has really seen before, and doesn’t have legitimate approval in the academy. So we were like, “let’s found a press to do that, to foster experimental work in the humanities and social sciences, that’s really weird.” (Eileen Joy, personal communication, April 9, 2021)

Quite strikingly, Joy describes the coercive structures in academia, particularly in the humanities, that discourage scholars from trying to do research aligned with the promises of academic freedom. For this reason, Joy anticipated that there would be a need for creating a “space” for experimentation and thus co-founded punctum books. As Joy recalls in setting up a scholar-led OA monograph press, caring for authors implies that experimentations can be promoted by creatively pushing the boundaries of research assessment. Moreover, their care-ethical approach also includes the readers, when Joy argues for fostering creativity in terms of writing in contrast to standardized forms regarding traditional publishers (Eileen Joy, personal communication, April 9, 2021).

4.2.3.2 Scholar-Led Presses

With regard to scholar-led presses, they entail a specific community that mutually gives and receives care. For instance, most scholar-led presses are relatively small and are usually maintained through gifted labor. It is what Pia et al. (2020) describe as a “labour of love” in their Open Access manifesto, which they argue is crucial to serve a needs-based system of scholarly publishing. In that context, these forms of labor encompass various publishing processes that are mostly unpaid and not well-noticed (Eileen Joy, personal communication, April 9, 2021). Moreover, most scholar-led presses are institutionally independent and often tend to run on self-exploitation as scholar-led activists wear multiple hats as part-time publishers (e.g., Martin Eve, personal communication, May 18, 2021; Eileen Joy, personal communication, April 9, 2021; Andreas Kirchner and Marcus Burkhardt, personal communication, May 20, 2021). This, in turn, discloses that scholar-led presses are predominantly situated in ephemeral and dependent positions, especially when run in isolation. They often experience feedback from externals on issues around “economic sustainability” (Eileen Joy, personal communication, April 9, 2021), which is often argued in connection to the economies of scale. However, scaling up is not an option for these scholar-led presses, as it would torpedo the principle of care. Consequently, a logical step is creating relationships around mutual care, for example, as shown by the founding of the ScholarLed consortium in 2018⁶.

Based on ideas of the open-source community, scholar-led presses give care to the community by sharing software code to create efficiencies in publishing workflows (Lucy Barnes, personal communication, April 1, 2021). In that sense, caregiving entails sharing knowledge, expertise, and infrastructure in scholarly publishing. As opposed to one-directional care, caring relationships come full circle, encompassing mutual care.

Furthermore, exchanging resources in a rather informal way raised awareness of the needs of an increasing number of scholar-led publishing initiatives. As a result, the allocation of resources initiated a formalization process of the informal sub-network of ScholarLed in 2018 (e.g., Joe Deville, personal communication, March 24, 2021). While formalizing as a group of scholar-led presses, not all initial partners were able to participate. For instance, due to several rea-

sons that are basically related to labor, the partnered press MayFly Books could not be included in the initial agreement. Although Tronto's framework does not provide an explicit explanation, Puig de la Bellacasa (2012, p. 204) stresses that care also entails a compulsion to make cuts, as not everyone can be cared for.

The question that may come up with "making cuts" is an issue of power hierarchies, control, and exclusion mechanisms that dwell within network formations. Being cut out in the first place was possibly not as severe for MayFly Books, but it reveals that care-based scholarly publishing does not necessarily provide more equity and inclusion under a capitalist regime. Thus, caregiving among collectives also includes difficult decisions that must be made in realizing its dialectics. To some extent, these decisions can reveal a certain kind of inattentiveness toward needed care. In that regard, caring relationships are shaped by balancing between caregiving, care-receiving, and caring for oneself as an act of "survival and politics," as Joy describes it by referring to Lorde's circumscription of care for oneself as an act of "self-preservation" (Eileen Joy, personal communication, April 9, 2021). Unlike considering care as an idealism, scholar-led presses refer to it more as an overarching value that is beneficial for creating more relationships, as expressed by Joy: "'Ethics of care' by itself doesn't sustain anything. ... in order for an 'ethics of care' to flourish, you need economic sustainability" (Eileen Joy, personal communication, April 9, 2021).

4.2.3.3 Open Knowledge Infrastructures

Considering knowledge infrastructures implies a more generalized perspective, as it overarches several stakeholders and includes socio-technological aspects. As regards scholarly publishing, various interconnected layers of knowledge infrastructures constitute a general scientific knowledge infrastructure. Thus, it seems crucial to include a caring perspective toward knowledge infrastructures when envisioning a scholarly knowledge commons.

In the context of care, the first step refers to the attentiveness that fundamentally initiates processes of care. Detecting failures within knowledge infrastructures makes them visible and thus challenges the taken-for-grantedness. Moreover, the main detected failures refer to an unequal allocation of resources inscribed in knowledge infrastructures that are organ-

ized according to a logic of capital. As an example, this includes vast differences among libraries, funders, publishers, and researchers, mirroring the tendencies of capital concentration in general (see Larivière et al., 2015; see also Posada & Chen, 2018). Moreover, technical flaws in the metadata distribution infrastructure were detected by small presses, as meeting the associated requirements set by central control instances (e.g., OCLC) is very labor-intensive. That, in turn, favors larger presses having more capital at their disposal (Tim Elfenbein, personal communication, April 7, 2022). In general, the scientific knowledge infrastructure receives care from every contributing stakeholder. However, the failures encompass stakeholders that take advantage of their control over certain parts of the infrastructure. A process that began decades ago, feeding publishing conglomerates that are now in control of neuralgic access mechanisms, specifically in the journal market (Ma, 2023; Pooley, 2022). With reference to the production of academic books, there are no returns to scale in several workflow processes, except when it comes to the infrastructure for book production. The scalability of knowledge infrastructures promises high ROIs and thus makes them a target for control and centralization. This, in turn, is considered a threat as "the entity that controls the infrastructure can control the entity that's doing the book production" (Rupert Gatti, personal communication, March 29, 2021).

Moreover, these enclosures highlight the importance of open infrastructures for the knowledge commons. In their contestation of these failures, scholar-led presses have built networks to innovate open infrastructures that involve care. In addition, they strive for decentralized and community-owned infrastructures, in which "anyone is able to improve, change, add a module, contribute to the development" (Anonymous librarian, personal communication, February 1, 2022). Creating open knowledge infrastructure involves processes of caregiving, as it should benefit the academic community at large. This may also entail contributions on smaller scales, such as format and file conversion tools, but also larger infrastructural projects such as COPIM⁷, DOAB⁸, or OAPEN⁹. Furthermore, open knowledge infrastructures potentially expand caring activities across different communities, as for instance, their maintenance requires caregiving.

In addition, while costs associated with commercial knowledge infrastructures are hidden from the end

users as they are folded into the charges of the publishers (Tim Elfenbein, personal communication, April 7, 2022), one main challenge that is associated with care in relation to knowledge infrastructures is to uncover its costs, including the labor involved. In that sense, this would require an “infrastructural inversion” (Edwards, 2010, p. XVI). However, there are limited options due to a lack of resources, leaving nothing to say for Elfenbein, as “publishing is not a solvable problem” (Tim Elfenbein, personal communication, April 7, 2022). Nonetheless, conceptualizing community-owned knowledge infrastructures as an alternative would provide care for the community. For instance, one crucial feature would facilitate small entities thriving alongside larger ones, prioritizing collaboration as opposed to competition (Joe Deville, personal communication, March 24, 2021). With regard to creating (open) knowledge infrastructures, allocating resources in terms of funding is closely connected to caregiving.

However, ensuring financial stability for (open) knowledge infrastructures comes along with major challenges that unveil the dependency on existing funding structures. As current funding structures predominantly focus on tangible units of knowledge production, open infrastructures that enable a circulation of knowledge without fees are reliant upon the attentiveness and goodwill of funding institutions (Lucy Barnes, personal communication, April 1, 2021).

Realizing what is at stake here encompasses advocacy for a labor of care on various scales, which is often connected to prestige, self-exploitation, and vulnerability. What this means for scholars and ethical publishers is exemplified by the work of Martin Eve and his collaborators to promote a new model of OA publishing that redirects funding structures by involving libraries on a broader scale. Promoting the OLH model as an innovative library membership scheme, named after Eve’s co-founded Open Library of Humanities, seemed to push the limits of scaling care work, as he reflects on his involvement in reaching out to libraries worldwide: “And then I had a stroke because the effort was so enormous. It really was extremely grueling. ... It was really very intensive outreach and marketing” (Martin Eve, personal communication, May 18, 2021).

Regarding this, Eve describes the enormous amount of labor time that is required to introduce an innovative model in the highly competitive publishing industry, which contradicts caring for oneself and self-exploits

the labor force beyond limits. In addition, this highlights the importance of commoning care in fostering a scholar-led knowledge commons. Although, Eve emphasizes that small-scaled scholar-led publishing encompasses multifaceted tasks, which is the downside of ethical undertakings in scholarly publishing.

As establishing such a model requires vast amounts of time and labor, the library membership model evolved from an individual to a collective approach—exemplified by the Open Book Collective¹⁰ as a follow-up to the COPIM project—, again favoring collaboration versus competition. The other reason for collectivizing the library membership scheme can be argued with a lack of budget lines and administrative cost-ineffectiveness for rather small expenditures among most libraries (Rupert Gatti, personal communication, March 29, 2021). So, one of the reasons for the strategy of network-based scaling (Schimmel, 2023) can be explained by an improved positioning for acquiring library funding for OA book publishing. Consequently, the formation of ScholarLed proved beneficial for allocating resources to focus care on infrastructural development.

5. Discussion

Analyzing processes of care and the underlying theoretical concepts reflects the core motive of striving towards a care-based knowledge commons in scholarly publishing. In being committed to care, the main focus of the investigated scholar-led publishing initiatives is to keep the scale small as entities as a counterpart to capitalist logics. Moreover, to create a resilient space or form for these small-scaled entities, a network of mutual care is necessary, as well as an open and community-governed infrastructure to facilitate the allocation of financial resources on various scales. Clearly, the sections above implied challenges and incompatibilities that are built into scholarly publishing under capitalism. This section critically reflects on major interscalar paradoxes in a global collective action towards a knowledge commons and how they are potentially tackled by scholar-led publishing initiatives.

The analysis of claiming care-based commoning in a global collective action towards OA unfolds at least four entangled dimensions that are identified as paradoxical:

1. The nexus of care/scale,
2. Knowledge infrastructures/scale,
3. Network_ing/labor,
4. Knowledge commons and questions of scale, power, control, and governance.

Against the background of a values-based knowledge commons, a global collective action faces manifold challenges on multiple scales. As regards knowledge commoning, collaboration across scales, as well as collective action that refers to shared values, form its basis. It is considered neuralgic for a care-based knowledge commons to replace commercial relationships in scholarly publishing as far as possible. Although scholarly publishing contributes to a distribution of knowledge on a global scale, the possibilities to participate in the (re-)production of knowledge (see De Angelis, 2017, p. 283) are predominantly characterized by local, regional, and national contexts. Taking part in the knowledge commons is therefore highly situated. In the same vein, initiatives striving for a care-based knowledge commons begin collective efforts locally with stakeholders having the potential, for instance, early adopters of potentially disruptive technologies and concepts, situated in a specific institutional setting. These collective initiatives reside within specific communities and are based where *their* knowledge is (re-) produced. Consequently, these initiatives set the *new* standards for a broadened community if successful. In that regard, this study has exemplified the dialectics of re-centering care in scholarly publishing and the inner constraints of providing economic sustainability within the wider community of the ROAC. While the ethics of care shapes the core values in a collective action towards the knowledge commons, it is not sufficient to sustain such endeavors. Even though care as a concept does not suffice alone, theorists of care define it as fundamental for re-establishing entangled relationships that “seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 161; Tronto, 2013, p. 19). In that context, the logic of care implies restrictions in terms of scaling operations. Caring for (more-than-) human relations is opposed to scalability, implying a displacement of commercial relationships. With reference to Tsing (2015, p. 260), the implementation of scalability entails standardization, which thwarts care and diversity as fundamental to providing academic freedom.

Furthermore, one of the main constraints in scholarly publishing is the impersonal domination of capital, as social relations subvert small entities with fewer

resources at their disposal. It is with this constraint that publishing is predominantly ephemeral for small presses. Moreover, the craft of publishing is a social process mainly encompassing labor as a non-scalable category. Labor can be made scalable through processes of standardization, such as standardized education and mechanisms of rules with reference to labor. As regards scholar-led presses, publishing is often a side job activity out of personal motivation, which “does not scale” (Andreas Kirchner and Marcus Burkhardt, personal communication, May 20, 2021). What is more, for most scholar-led presses, publishing is very labor-intensive, and it is difficult to cover marketing, outreach, and dissemination at the same time. Additionally, self-restricting business operations for the sake of care opens possibilities to create new relationships based on shared values. In that regard, the concept of “scaling small” (Adema & Moore, 2021) helps to implement care at scale. These networks of mutual care shall not only fulfil the function of enabling smaller entities (e.g., scholar-led presses) to thrive by creating open infrastructures and collectively allocating resources. Scaling up as networks also signals a drive to reform scholarly publishing structures as threats to the knowledge commons.

In addition, reaching out collectively on broader scales shall create more inclusivity, especially by creating mission-aligned communities of stakeholders in scholarly publishing that include libraries and funding institutions. The attempt to collectivize work through the establishment of network structures forms the basis for commoning care. However, according to Star and Ruhleder (1996, p. 113), functioning infrastructures are characterized as those whose underlying structures and processes remain hidden from the users and beneficiaries, which in turn contradicts the demand for making care work visible.

Although knowledge infrastructures have the potential to internationalize national funding structures, resources are very unequally distributed among academic institutions. The problem of multiscalar power asymmetries remains unanswered here, and these can be further reproduced by the knowledge infrastructures developed. Hence, forms of collective action continue from the local to the global level while maintaining the specific organization of power structures. A possible loss of value could be accompanied by an increase in members, which in turn could shake cohesion. Collectivizing the allocation of resources can contribute to reducing vulnerabilities that are at

tached to care. However, including academic institutions and funders in the broader community means that consistent dependency on policymakers and stakeholders with differing interests still shapes many caring processes.

6. Conclusion

In summary, the critique of scholarly publishing emphasizes the need for a care-based knowledge commons, rejecting market-driven approaches and prioritizing collaboration and recognition of contributions. Scholar-led initiatives focus on acknowledging individual efforts and fostering community networks. Their shift towards re-centering care underscores the importance of nurturing relationships and values within scholarly publishing and beyond. Through their involvement, care in scholarly publishing is increasingly recognized, while also challenging existing inequalities. Scholar-led presses demonstrate a commitment to care by prioritizing accessibility on the supply and the demand side. However, challenges remain in sustainability, underscoring the need for collective action that reflects existing power dynamics. By prioritizing care, the scholarly community can work towards a more diverse and inclusive publishing system.

Although the focus on care in the publication system brings with it an acknowledgment of relationalities and work processes, the demand for more recognition is not sufficient, as it ultimately affirms social domination.

Addressing the challenges for commoning care in scholarly publishing necessitates a radical approach that challenges the commodification of knowledge and labor, fosters mutuality and reciprocity, and nurtures relations of solidarity. Finally, envisioning a scholar-led knowledge commons entails navigating complexities and tensions inherent in commoning and care, as well as being subsumed by the imperatives of capital and value. Yet, by embracing care-ethical principles and fostering collective action, the envisioned scholar-led knowledge commons holds the promise of transformative change, resonating with the continuous struggle for emancipation from compulsive and exploitative structures.

Notes

- ¹ Dotawo is an Open Access journal which was founded by academics and para-academics committed to furthering knowledge in the field of Nubian Studies (van Gerven Oei, 2017, pp. 7–8).
- ² The Open Access book publisher Mattering Press was founded in 2012 by a collective of early career researchers predominantly from Science and Technology Studies (<https://www.matteringpress.org/about/the-flows-collective>).
- ³ Kyngervi is student-led OA journal that focuses on Norse Queer and Gender Studies (<https://www.kyngervi.org/about>).
- ⁴ The Open Access journal On_Culture was founded by researchers who are at various stages of their careers (<https://www.on-culture.org/about/concept/>).
- ⁵ The publishing platform Soapbox was founded in 2018 and is managed by students (<https://www.soapboxjournal.net/about>).
- ⁶ See more on: <https://scholarled.org/> (last retrieved: 07/03/2025).
- ⁷ Community-led Open Publication Infrastructures for Monographs (COPIM) was a project funded by Research England and Arcadia Fund between 2019-2023 (<https://copim.pubpub.org/copim-project>).
- ⁸ Abbreviation for Directory of Open Access Books (<https://www.doabooks.org/>).
- ⁹ Open Access Publishing in European Networks (OAPEN) was a EU-funded project to develop a sustainable publication model for OA books (<https://www.oapen.org/oapen/1891940-organisation>).
- ¹⁰ See more on: <https://www.openbookcollective.org/>

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