Understanding the current landscape of alternative publishing platforms

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Knowledge Exchange commissioned Research Consulting to work on a project to understand the current landscape of alternative publishing platforms, exploring how publishing platforms, research organisations and funders enable innovation in scholarly communication. Significant scoping was undertaken by Knowledge Exchange, published in the paper *Scoping the second phase of the Alternative publishing platforms work*.

Research Consulting developed a proposed thematic approach aiming to explore the core issues identified by Knowledge Exchange, looking across multiple stakeholder perspectives. The questions were thematically organised in a systematic way, to ensure comprehensive coverage across desk research and stakeholder engagement activities. These research questions and sub-questions are linked on Octopus as individual Research Problems, but the key themes and research questions are:

1. Funder strategy and policy: What approaches do research funders have towards alternative publishing platforms, and how important are they in the context of funders' wider scholarly communication strategies?

2. Value proposition of alternative publishing platforms: What are the immediate and pressing challenges that alternative publishing platforms are trying to address?

3. Legitimacy of non-traditional research outputs: What types and formats of publication do funders and researchers consider to be "legitimate" research outputs?

4. Lessons learnt from alternative publishing: What lessons can be learnt from experience with alternative publishing platforms?

5. Uptake and continued engagement: What factors affect a researcher's decision to use (or not) an alternative publishing platform?

The research questions relating to funding strategy and policy and legitimacy in particular help bridge across stakeholder groups.

The five themes also provide a framework for analysing and presenting findings, making it easier to develop recommendations that address systemic issues rather than focusing on stakeholder-specific concerns.

The five themes, questions and sub-questions were iteratively refined and developed through dialogue between Research Consulting, a core group of Knowledge Exchange experts: Anna Mette Morthorst (DeiC), Sebastian Brandt (DFG) Xenia van Edig (TIB) and Jean-François Lutz (University of Lorraine) and the full authors of this output i.e. the wider Knowledge Exchange Task & Finish Groups and Prof Stephen Pinfield. This work took place throughout January and February 2025.

The questions seek to cover all questions in the original scoping document produced by KE (Knowledge Exchange, 2024), and no questions or areas have been excluded as part of the revised hierarchy and structure.

Key definitions

This project defines Alternative Publishing Platforms as innovative channels for scholarly communication that operate outside traditional book and journal publishing frameworks. The use of the term "alternative" is recognised as presenting the risk of a certain narrowing, or even ambiguity, particularly in the case of platforms that are mainstream in their linguistic or disciplinary area. However, despite its shortcomings, this term allows easier designation of the object under study in order to provide a contrast to the conventional stakeholders of academic publishing.

To better characterise our understanding of this landscape, a set of examples are provided below. Alternative Publishing Platforms may:

- have a wide disciplinary scope and/or accommodate a wider range of publication types compared to other platforms;

- offer the publication of submitted versions/preprints by default;

- have an open peer review process or seek to reform today's mainstream approaches to peer review;

- emphasise free availability of content, transparency and efficiency in research;

- deprioritise selectivity or prestige;

- prioritise speed of publication;

- prioritise or support reproducibility and replicability of research results; or

- aim to tackle publication bias.

Building on previous work by Knowledge Exchange, it was decided to focus on platforms that offer a combination of the above features (or, indeed, other innovative features). This suggests that 'truly alternative' platforms go beyond solely focusing on one of these activities (e.g. only focusing on open peer review; only offering preprint posting).

Conventional academic publishing refers to traditional methods of distributing scholarly works that predate the digital transformation of academic communication. These might be long-standing venues, or newer venues adopting a similar format. These venues have historically held, and still hold, significant influence over how research is disseminated and validated. Legacy academic publishing includes journal and book publishing through traditional commercial publishers, established learned societies that may be dependent on revenue from publishing activities and long-standing university presses, often tied to prestigious institutions.

Initial findings

Desk research approach

We conducted an exploratory literature search, primarily searching Google Scholar for references, but also relying on previous knowledge. There were three separate strands to the search, and we assessed returned results for relevance and inclusion.

1. Targeted keyword searches:

   - Over last 5 years by keyword: "open scholarship", "alternative publishing", "innovative publishing", "new forms of publishing", "publishing platforms"

   - By name for "truly alternative" publishing platforms identified in Phase 1

   - References by keyword "alternative publishing platforms".

2. Citation searching based on core references identified in the scoping of this phase.

3. Expert recommendations from Research Consulting, the KE Core and Task and Finish Groups and Prof. Stephen Pinfield.

The landscape remains inconsistent and fragmented

Alternative Publishing Platforms (APPs) have emerged in response to perceived limitations of traditional academic publishing, including concerns about publisher dominance, research

integrity, publication speed and access barriers. Recognised examples of 'truly alternative' platforms (Lutz et al, 2023) include Octopus, F1000 Research, ResearchEquals, and PeerCommunity Journal, each implementing different approaches to scholarly communication.

Figure showing logos of key examples of alternative publishing platforms, surrounded by text indicating related models of publication
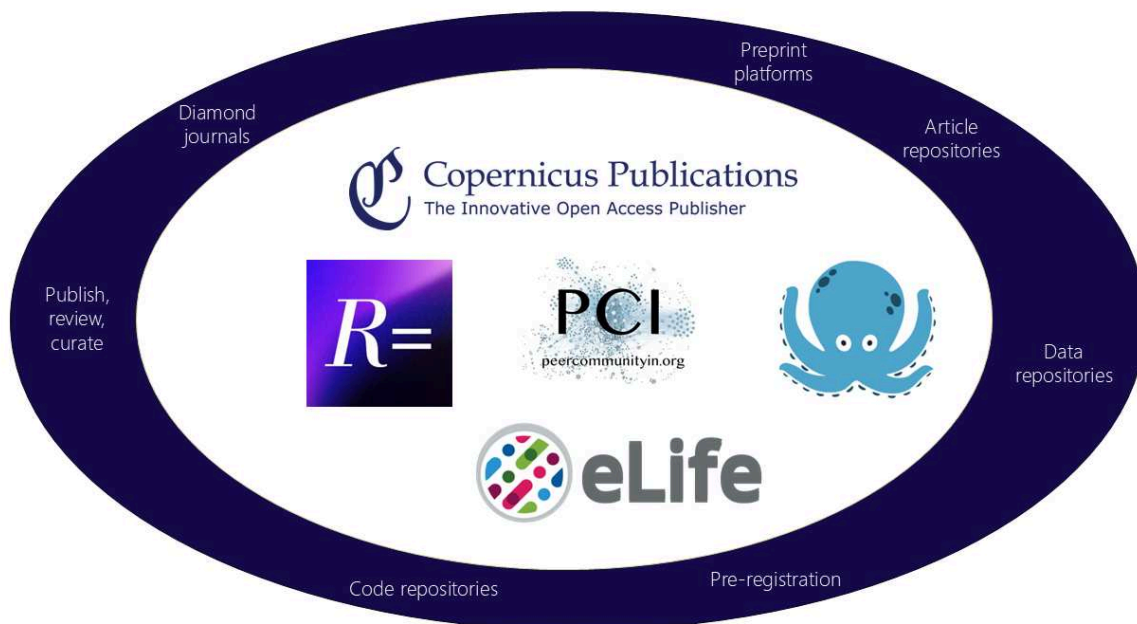
Despite their growing importance, terminology in this space remains a challenge. While the term "alternative publishing platforms" has gained some traction, it can also be found in the literature loosely referring to a range of alternative practices, for example including repositories in general (for example: Drake et al. 2023).

Alternative publishing platforms offer multiple theoretical benefits

The stated benefits of APPs often overlap with broader open research initiatives. Most value propositions remain theoretical rather than evidence-based, suggesting a need for more empirical assessment of their impact. APPs aim to:

- improve the efficiency of research by increasing speed of dissemination.
- democratise knowledge by making research available as a global public good.
- improve research integrity and transparency through open practices that enhance reproducibility.

Funder support for APPs is limited and inconsistent

While APPs offer potential solutions to problems in scholarly communication, funding support remains limited. This disconnect between theoretical benefits and practical implementation creates challenges for sustainability.

Research funders rarely discuss specific support for APPs, but some have broadened their funding requirements and definitions in ways that could include them. For example, Wellcome (2024) have extended their funding so that it covers broadly scoped publishing models, platforms and open scholarly communication infrastructure.

There are some limited examples of research funders supporting alternative publishing platforms. This includes Research England funding Octopus (Research England, 2021), the Gates Foundation, Wellcome Trust and others setting up F1000 Platforms (F1000, 2025), and plans for Open Research Europe (European Commission, 2024).

Peer review remains central to perceptions of research legitimacy

A critical tension exists around peer review, with traditional approaches still viewed as essential for legitimacy despite criticisms (for example, Trueblood et al., 2025). This creates a paradoxical situation where platforms attempting to innovate in quality assessment face scepticism about their ability to maintain standards.

- The role of peer review in assessing quality of research is a key feature emphasised in discussing the legitimacy of research outputs.
- (Perceptions of) quality concerns are mentioned in the context of preprint use and post-publication peer review.
- Alternative peer review models face scepticism despite potential advantages in transparency and speed.

Multiple factors influence researcher uptake of APPs, with barriers outweighing incentives

Researcher adoption appears influenced by disciplinary norms, career stage considerations and practical concerns about discoverability and fragmentation. The literature suggests that cultural and structural factors continue to limit widespread adoption.

- Few studies directly show what influences researcher uptake and use of APPs, but predictions can be made from wider open research literature.

- Career stage appears to influence motivation and / or willingness to use alternative platforms (Gownaris et al (2022).

- Disciplinary customs play a significant role in determining an author's choice of publishing models and feelings towards these.

Figure from Gownaris et al (2022) illustrating barriers to the use of alternative approaches at different stages of the scientific life cycle. Used under Creative Commons licence CC BY 4.0 http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/
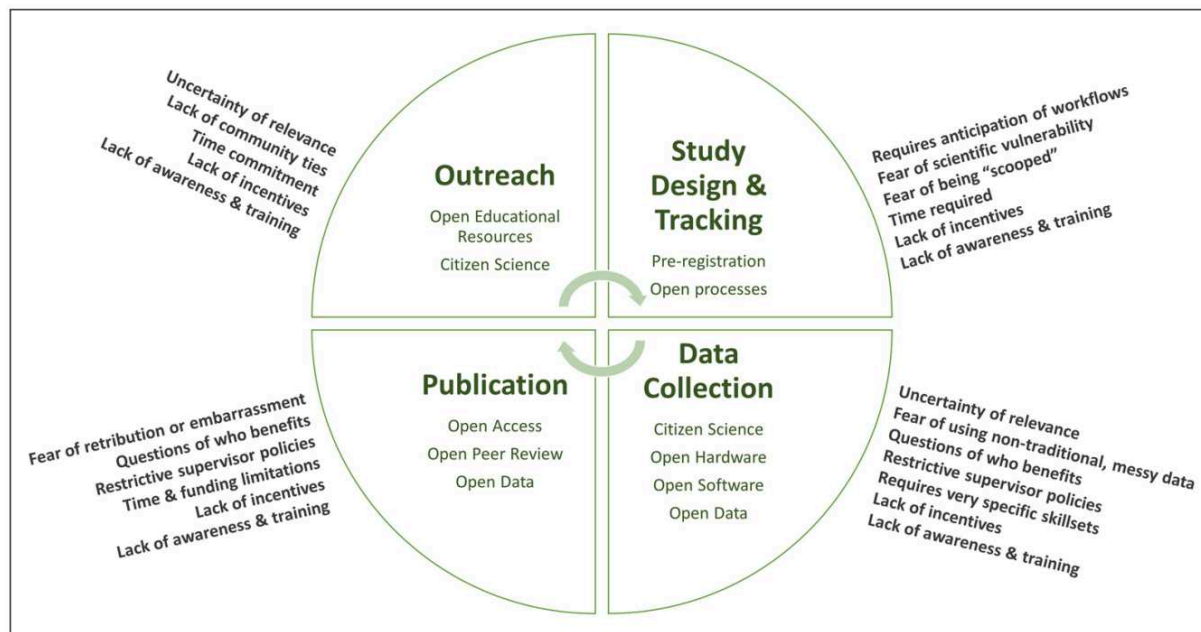
Disciplinary perspectives

Research from Bowman et al (2022) showcases perspectives on open scholarship practices (OSPs) in the field of Communication. Respondents expressed several concerns, including reservations about unclear standards, presumed incompatibility with scholarly approaches, fears of a misuse of shared materials and perceptions of a toxic culture surrounding open scholarship.

- As different disciplines have different inclinations towards open scholarship, discipline-specific rates of adoption and support for APPs are likely despite the significant overlaps in value proposition we have identified.

Even if APPs work well and are well integrated, a core requirement in the Open Science Center's strategy for culture change (Nosek, 2019), their adoption remains limited.

Communities struggle to adopt APPs in a relatively unsupportive or uninterested environment. This adoption pattern follows classic innovation diffusion theory, where a small number of early adopters and champions must personally bear the costs of experimentation and advocacy,

gradually influencing peers through demonstrated benefits until a critical mass builds sufficient momentum to shift disciplinary norms.

Without policy and institutional support at higher levels of the pyramid, these individual advocates face an uphill battle in converting initial interest into widespread community practices.

Limited evidence exists on lessons learned by APPs

Our analysis highlights a significant gap in empirical studies on APP effectiveness and lessons learned, with most evidence being anecdotal rather than systematic.

This lack of documented experience creates challenges for platforms seeking to build on prior knowledge and may slow the development of best practices in the alternative publishing space.

Where reflections are available, they come from a broader open scholarship context rather than focusing on APPs. The most common thoughts shared are on business models, alongside considerations around the need to consider library discovery and acquisitions processes and research culture (including the impact of metrics and rankings).

Progress towards answering our research questions

Identification of knowledge gaps

Clarity on what remains to be discovered is valuable before conducting interviews and focus groups. Key gaps include:

- Funder approaches
- Validation of value proposition
- Lessons learned by APPs
- Researcher decision-making factors.

Preliminary findings ready for testing

A number of initial observations can now be explored and validated through stakeholder engagement. The following areas are of particular interest:

- Tensions between theoretical benefits and practical implementation

- Overlap between approaches to further open science and the features/functionality of APPs

- Disciplinary differences.

Affiliations

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References

No references have been specified for this publication.

Parent publications

[What are the immediate and pressing challenges that alternative publishing platforms are trying to address?](#)

[What lessons can be learnt from experience with alternative publishing platforms?](#)

[What factors affect a researcher's decision to use (or not) an alternative publishing platform?](#)

[What types and formats of publication do funders and researchers consider to be "legitimate" research outputs?](#)

[What approaches do research funders have towards alternative publishing platforms, and how important are they in the context of funders' wider scholarly communication strategies?](#)

Data access statement

Data has not yet been collected to test this hypothesis (i.e. this is a preregistration)

Funders

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Conflict of interest

Two of our authors are associated with Alternative Publishing Platforms. Alex Freeman is Creator of Octopus CIC and Stephen Pinfield is an Editor at MetaROR.