"Look to the Champions of Freedom for All"

How Libraries Can Advance Democracy Through Opening Access

Charles Watkinson and Kate McCready*

> *"The people are the only censors of their governors: and even their errors will tend to keep these to the true principles of their institution. The way to prevent these irregular interpositions of the people is to give them full information of their affairs thro' the channel of the public papers, and to contrive that those papers should penetrate the whole mass of the people." Thomas Jefferson, January 16, 1787.*

Introduction

The debate surrounding the transition to an open-access scholarly communications environment is familiar in library and publishing circles. We often find ourselves entangled in the nuances of policy and implementation, risking losing sight of the broader possibilities that open access presents. As libraries successfully facilitate more scholarly works becoming freely accessible, we face a pivotal question: "What now?" or (more wordily) "How can these investments in openness be harnessed and expanded to advance the public missions of our institutions?" This paper argues that open access is not just a logistical achievement, but a powerful tool for promoting democratic ideals. Through a series of case studies, this paper illustrates actionable strategies for leveraging open-access resources to foster democratic engagement and expand informed participation locally, nationally, and globally.

The Role of Open Access in Advancing Democracy

Open access democratizes information by removing economic barriers, enabling individuals

* *Charles Watkinson is Associate University Librarian at University of Michigan Library, email: watkinc@umich.edu; Kate McCready is Program Director for Open Publishing at Big Ten Academic Alliance, email: kate.mccready@btaa.org*

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from varied socio-economic backgrounds to participate in scholarly discourse. However, merely facilitating access is just the start. Only if open-access materials can be contextualized, organized, and promoted will they connect with readers or, to use Jefferson's words, "penetrate the whole mass of the people" so that these readers can act as informed citizens.

As John Willinsky wrote in 2006 in *The Access Principle*, one of the founding case statements for open access, "greater public access to research and scholarship has the potential to raise the level of discourse for this emerging democratic form [the Internet]. It could turn a citizen's online forum from a sounding board into a far more informative review of government policies and practices. It could provide a check and balance to the one-sided representations of interest groups, political parties, and governments."[1] Libraries, as experts in connecting information with its readers, are well placed to leverage their investments in open access to promote public understanding and create an informed citizenry. By facilitating imaginative programming and collaborations, they can transform open-access materials into engines of social change.

Connecting investments in open access to the advancement of democracy is especially significant for content in humanities fields, where books remain the predominant format. The arguments for publishing open access in science, technology, engineering, and medical fields focus on themes such as faster impact on scientific discovery, increased citation to boost prestige, and compliance with government mandates. Humanities and qualitative social sciences research is usually slower moving, citations especially to books are hard to track, and most funder mandates and institutional policies still exempt books. This may leave librarians struggling to articulate the benefits of funding OA book programs to university or college administrations, especially when the humanities are regarded as secondary to sciences and medicine in economic priority.

Open access to books certainly benefits authors. The most extensive study of the impact of OA on books notes a "robust effect for downloads, the geographical diversity of these downloads, and for citations. Downloads of OA books in the study were on average 10 times higher than those of non-OA books, and citations of OA books were 2.4 times higher on average."[2]

Unfortunately, there isn't a programmatic, standard method used by institutions to support the costs of making scholarly books available OA, nor do libraries have effective arguments for justifying the cost of making these books openly available. Some libraries have managed an "OA Fund" to cover institutional payment of publishing charges for faculty authors, but that hasn't gained traction as the dominant mode of funding scholarly monographs. Increasingly, library investments in membership or subscribe-to-open types models are. But, if libraries are to invest in these, they must articulate benefits focused on the anticipated expanded use of their collections.[3] Contribution to affordable learning is the most convincing local benefit. However, the monographs that are the core of programs such as JSTOR's Path to Open, MIT Press's Direct to Open, the Open Book Collective, or University of Michigan Press's Fund to Mission programs are not instructors' first choices as textbooks. Libraries can therefore be challenged to justify their investments in ways that align with their host institutions' missions—a quandary discussed in Rick Anderson's article on "defending the Walled Garden" in *The Scholarly Kitchen*.[4]

Now, suppose the support of OA books could be compellingly connected to the advancement of democracy. In that case, a connection to a key institutional priority at many institutions in the USA is easier to make. Library investment justifications can connect organically to institutional priorities and supporting OA books may even be hot commodities for the sorts of philanthropic donation that usually go to special collections. As Ioana Hulbert and Deirdre Harkins note in their 2024 Ithaka report on the link between higher education and democracy, "in the US context one of higher education's primary goals has historically been to promote democracy."[5] The promotion of an informed citizenry appears in the current mission statements of US institutions of various sizes and types. It is often connected to "global citizenship" and "international engagement." Indeed, the title of this paper, "Look to the champions of freedom for all" comes from the University of Michigan's Vision 2034, and its "democracy, civic, and global engagement" pillar (https://vision2034.umich.edu/).

The Case Studies

The factually-challenged rhetorical strategies employed by all sides in the 2024 US Presidential election and the rise of increasingly plausible AI-generated fakes and disinformation have made the last few years particularly productive for investigating how OA can advance an informed citizenry. The three case studies below describe specific initiatives that have attempted to connect trustworthy open books published by university presses with particular user communities—students on a single university campus, non-academic US readers, and a wider global community.

Case Study 1: OA Books Engage Student Voters

Information literacy practices in libraries have often been pursued separately from scholarly communication initiatives, but encouraging engagement with open access books supported by the library offers a bridge between the two.[6] While students at a particular institution will have access to books purchased by (or subscribed to by) the library, highlighting open access books in the library catalog guarantees an inclusive experience. Not only are there no barriers to access but books are not locked into platform experiences that involve navigating digital rights management. Promoting events connected to open access books also allows community involvement without navigating licensing restrictions.

In 2024, University of Michigan Library partnered with the University of Michigan Press (http://press.umich.edu/), the student-run Michigan Advertising and Marketing (MAM) club (https://www.mamclub.org/about), and the steering committee of the President's Year of Democracy initiative (https://democracy.umich.edu/about/) to select and promote a collection of open access books published by the Press that provided additional context to topics under discussion in the 2024 US presidential campaign.

In the spring, a group of MAM students identified books of interest and created an online reading list and social media campaigns to promote its contents (https://press.umich.edu/Books/Dialogues-in-Democracy). In the fall, another group of MAM students organized a physical exhibit on the 3rd floor of the Shapiro Library (the center of undergraduate life in the U-M Library) and organized an event, "Plates and Politics," which brought together over 90 undergraduates and two faculty speakers connected to the Press about two weeks after the election to reflect on the shared experience and assess its significance in global and historical context.

FIGURE 1

Over 90 Undergraduate Students Participated in the Plates and Politics Event that Derived from the Dialogues in Democracy Initiative at University of Michigan.
Photo by Shannon Schulte.



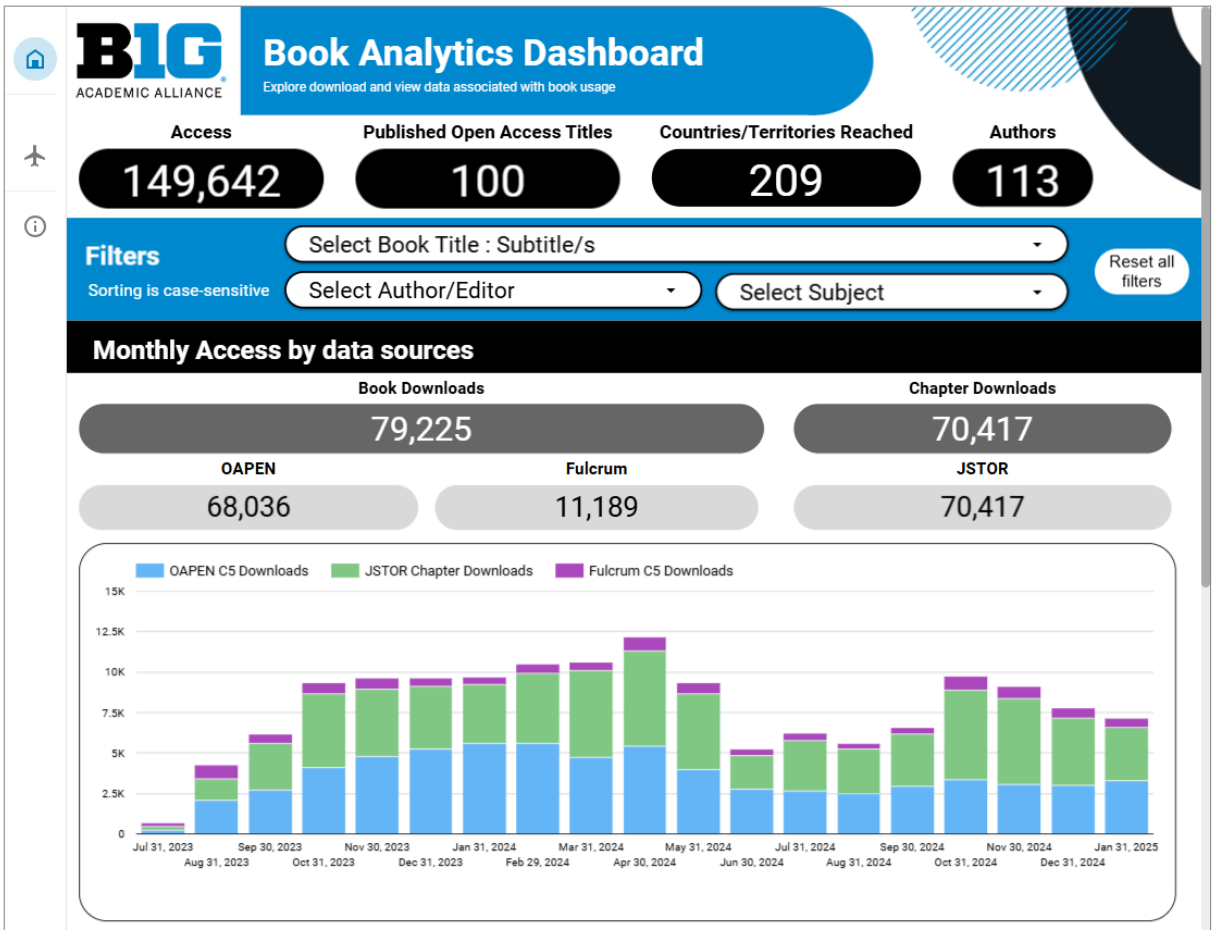
"Dialogues in Democracy" represented a successful partnership with a student group to host a shared community reads and provide a forum for discussion around issues at the heart of a national. It presented a curated reading list of open-access books on pressing societal issues. These resources formed the basis for discussions that engaged students and community members in bipartisan dialogue and fostered a culture of informed citizenship among first-time voters.

Case Study 2: OA Books Circumvent Us Book Bans

For the 2023-2024 school year, PEN America reported that public school book bans rose 200% over the previous year. The majority of the banning campaigns were designed to suppress education about people of color, LGBTQ+ people, and sex, diminishing important voices in the public sphere.[7] In late 2023 and early 2024, Big Ten Academic Alliance libraries and university presses collaborated to ensure that critical literature about sex, gender, and the experiences of LGBTQ+ people was available open access. One hundred older books from six university presses were selected, converted to accessible EPUB3 files, and distributed widely through JSTOR, MUSE, and OAPEN. They were also indexed in library discovery services and made available in a branded collection with high-quality MARC records that included classifications from https://homosaurus.org/, the international LGBTQ+ linked data vocabulary.

FIGURE 2

The Usage Dashboard for Big Ten Open Books Shows the Impact of Open Access Books, Drawing on Information from Three Major Distribution Platforms



At a time when book bans targeted themes related to gender and sexuality, the initiative sought to ensure that high-quality information was freely available to promote the understanding of diverse identities and ensure that marginalized voices could continue to contribute. The initiative recognized that OA books, which can easily be reposted and curated in multiple collections, are almost impossible to suppress. These efforts underscore the library's role in safeguarding intellectual freedom and diversity of thought. Quoted in an article on the collection's launch, the creators noted, "The rise in attacks on free speech only bolsters us in our commitment to ensuring access to information to all who seek it."[8]

Between August 1, 2023 and February 28, 2025, the titles were accessed 149,642 times.

Almost 1,500 uses per book is remarkable compared to the estimated usage they saw as print publications held in the libraries of doctoral and masters-granting institutions (based on circulation statistics at Big Ten-affiliated libraries). The number of downloads per book is quadruple the estimated number of checkouts.

Responses to a pop-up survey deployed on the books add qualitative texture. When asked "Why are you interested in this book?", responses from readers in the USA included:

- "I've never heard of it and the chances of me finding a hard copy are slim. Also I'm gay and midwestern."
- "Interested in cultural perspectives on disability as part of my professional development in public service and also as a personal inquiry."

A follow-up question was: "Is there anything else you would like to tell us or think we should know about how you found or are using the ebook? or about yourself?" Responses:

- "I really appreciate that this is available for free. I don't have much disposable income and it's important to me to know my elders and understand my community better. Queer history resources and especially literature are hard to get a hold of. Even more so when one is mobility challenged (disabled) thank you for what you do."
- "Thank you for this wonderful project and for sharing valuable and empowering queer knowledge outside the closed walls of academia, into which some of us have less access."

Case Study 3: OA books Support International Resistance to Authoritarianism

The tension between democracy and authoritarianism is, of course, not just a concern in the USA. How these forces play out globally also have profound implications for US life, as effects of Russian aggression on democratic Ukraine prove. Access to scholarly materials is informative and empowering for these individuals, providing knowledge supporting resilience and resistance against authoritarianism.

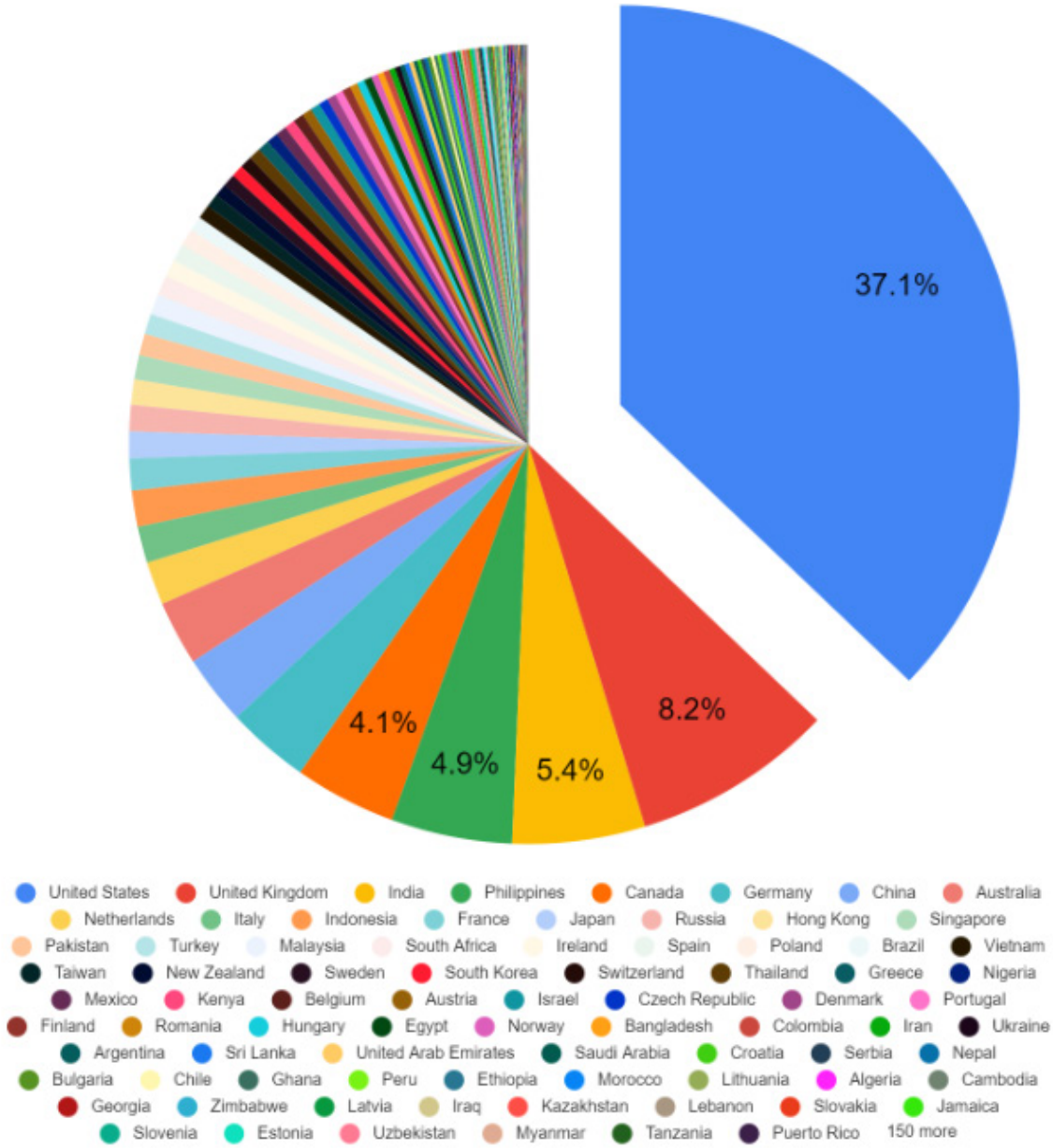
University of Michigan Press is a leading publisher in international relations, and its book series on *Emerging Democracies* contains many prize-winning studies. Since 2021, the Press has gradually expanded the open access availability of frontlist books using a business model named "Fund to Mission" (https://ebc.press.umich.edu/invest). This model relies on four funding pillars to spread the costs of publishing open access books and ensure that no author is ever required to pay to publish (which can result in an inequitable distribution of titles left behind a paywall and titles that are openly available).

In 2024, 75% of UMP's frontlist was published immediately OA (60 books) and 73% of the usage of UMP books on the Press's platform came from outside the USA, a flip from the years before the Fund to Mission program. India, China, the Philippines, Indonesia, Pakistan, and Turkey were top sources of use, and the comments received from readers completing a pop-up survey on OA books emphasized the value international readers placed on access to trusted content.

Some quotes illustrate the story.

FIGURE 3

Percent of Usage of the University of Michigan Press Ebook Collection on Fulcrum Coming from Different Countries in 2024 Three Quarters of Use Comes from Outside the USA



"As a researcher from Egypt, it is sometimes very hard to get access to many books and academic papers. I believe that getting access to those books could be one of the tools used to fight authoritarianism and spread democracy in the Middle East."

"Now in Russia there are few alternative sources of information; most information channels broadcast the state agenda in one way or another. Therefore, any alternative opinion, especially one based on facts, is very valuable."

Conclusion

The library community's challenge is to shift the conversation on open access from "how" to "what now." By embracing our professional roles, we can transform open-access knowledge into a catalyst for democratic engagement and empowerment, creating opportunities for dialogue, debate, and the pursuit of freedom.

Open access removes economic barriers to access, allowing a diverse range of individuals to engage with scholarly discourse and thus promote broader participation in democratic processes. Libraries play a crucial role in this ecosystem. As custodians and facilitators of knowledge dissemination, they possess the unique ability to connect resources with communities. Through imaginative programming and partnerships, libraries can mobilize open-access materials to facilitate dialogues, encourage critical thinking, and support civic engagement, as evidenced by initiatives like community reads and collaborations to resist book bans.

Furthermore, as the case studies demonstrate, open-access resources serve not only local and national audiences but also reach disenfranchised populations globally, empowering them with knowledge crucial for resilience against oppressive regimes. By highlighting these connections and emphasizing the central role of open access in aligning with institutional priorities, particularly in the humanities, this paper reinforces the notion that supporting open-access initiatives is a valuable investment in promoting democracy and advancing the public good.

Recognizing the power of open access can help higher education institutions consider their missions and values and ensure their contributions to an informed and engaged global citizenry. Libraries, in partnership with university presses and other stakeholders, can thus continue to champion freedom and equality, echoing the vision espoused by educational leaders to nurture democratic values and civic responsibility. By embracing open access as a tool for social change, we can collectively work towards a more informed, just, and democratic society.

Notes

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