



**Issue 3: Peer Review: New  
Possibilities  
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## **An Interview with Masoud Yazdani**

**by Sean Scanlan**

Masoud Yazdani is the founder and editor of Intellect Books, an independent academic publisher based in London. Intellect currently publishes over 80 journals in four distinct subject areas: visual arts, film studies, cultural and media studies, and performing arts. <http://www.intellectbooks.co.uk/>

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**Abstract:** Sean Scanlan conducted an email interview with Masoud Yazdani, the editor of Intellect Books, an independent academic publisher in the fields of creative practice and popular culture, whose aim is to publish scholarly books and journals that provide a vital space for widening critical debate in new and emerging subjects.

**Keywords:** peer review, scholarly publishing, scholarly editing, humanities, Intellect Books

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The following is an email interview between Sean Scanlan, the editor of *NANO*, and Masoud Yazdani, founder and editor of Intellect Books.

SEAN SCANLAN: First, I'd like to thank you for taking part in this interview. To get started, I thought it would be helpful to talk about the history of your publishing company. You were formerly a Professor of Digital Media at the University of the West of England (Bristol) for many years while also beginning Intellect in 1986. What was the impetus for moving away from academia and for starting Intellect? Of course, it could easily be argued that you did not leave academia, but wanted to engage with it in a new way. What are some of the new insights that have you gained from being both a "gamekeeper" and a "poacher"?

MASOUD YAZDANI: I started my publishing company because I wanted to establish a journal in my academic field—Artificial Intelligence—and, at that time, no publisher was interested. To make or foster a new academic subject area where you need many things and a journal is one of them. Many publishers only want to publish in subject areas that are already established. So you have a catch-22 problem. My company, Intellect, has been trying to break this pattern by launching journals for new subject areas. More recently, in, say, the past five years (1998 - 2013) we have been successful at launching many new journals at the same time as we have found a business model that works. Essentially, our model is that we use the profits from older journals when they become profitable to support new journals. At the same time, when our subject areas become established, other, usually larger, publishers become interested, and we can sell some of our older titles to increase the investment in newer subjects. In this way we can act as a "nursery" for developing and shepherding new ideas and new subjects.

SS: I first heard about you and Intellect Books at the 2013 Modern Language Association Conference in Boston in which you took part in a panel titled "Inventing New Journals: The Pressures for and against New Scholarly Publications" (Panel 485). During your talk you mentioned a few facts that highlighted not only the problems of academic publishing but also the problems of what it means to read, write, and edit in the digital realm. You said that each year about 200 new, English language academic journals are launched; and then you followed this up by stating that each year over 400 English language academic journals shut down. And if, as you say, academic journals are still the key to training the way scholars become scholars—through writing, submitting, editing, peer reviewing, and publishing—then something very alarming is happening. Can you speak about what these facts and figures mean?

MY: In my opinion journals do not get born or die because of a lack of readership. Instead, they are mainly driven by the demands of academics to publish. For example, as a new academic community grows, you might expect that the number of new journals attached to this community would be much higher than the number of journals attached to older academic communities. However, as you can see from the figures, this is not the case. The reason behind this is the

fact that publishers are very conservative in risking their capital on unproven or new topics. Most large journal publishers want to buy journals with proven track records from smaller publishers or take over a journal already established by a learned society.

SS: In your blog at Intellect you reminisce about publishing a broadside while in school in Iran. One of the most satisfying moments was when your fellow classmates would read and then comment on the stories by writing directly onto the poster, which, as you say, is very interactive. This direct connection between writer and audience is very appealing, although it can quickly become messy and ad hominem. What types of reader comment functions do you like? And, relatedly, what sorts of peer review mechanisms do you find the easiest to use? Which are the most difficult to use?

MY: I think within academic publishing there is little room for reader feedback. It is for this reason that peer review plays a critical role in deciding what should or should not be published. There have been suggestions that we could publish academic work without pre publication review and rely on post publication reader feedback. I am not convinced that this will replace blind peer review any time soon. Finding reviewers who are willing to spend time to do justice to the job is very difficult. However, within the community there is an understanding that if you want the publishing system to function well you need to offer your time to act as a reviewer.

I personally prefer single blind peer review where the author does not know who the reviewer is. Double blind when we try and mask the identity of the author in practice does not work as most reviewers can guess who the author is anyway.

SS: I am interested in hearing more about your idea that academics need to wear two hats: they need to perform peer review for others and also submit for publication. This seems logical, but there is no institutionalized or organized way for academics to find ways to join or volunteer to become a peer reviewer. They are certainly asked to publish, but there does not seem to be any easy way to join an editorial or review board. This leads me to wonder if there might be a need to train recent graduates on the craft of reviewing. How do Intellect journals handle the review process?

MY: Peer review is the lifeblood of academic publishing. The system we have had for many years is not perfect, but it has delivered a sound quality assurance system. At Intellect we review every book manuscript and journal submission by at least two academics. Sometimes we use a double blind system, but it is normally easy for a reviewer to figure out who the author is in small academic communities. So we settle on single blind system in most cases. That means at least the identity of reviewer is masked from the author. I have heard many arguments about the merits of switching to a post publication review system, and I am not convinced it would be any better than the pre publication review system.

It is getting harder and harder to get reviewers who will do the work for free and in a short space of time. Currently, we offer our reviewers free books, but we are getting ready to pay some of them around \$40 for each review. We have been asking academics to register with us if they

wish to join our community of reviewers. However, I am skeptical of people putting themselves forward to become members of journal editorial boards as you suggest. Each journal is run by a prominent editor who should have the knowledge of specialists in that community in order to choose who best can serve in an editorial board. We are trying to make this task easier by publishing a directory of researchers who have published with us (See: <https://www.intellectbooks.com/authors>).

SS: The end of October, 2013 is International Open Access Week. Around the world, organizations will hold conferences that examine the need for the free exchange of information and the continual problem of financing such free exchange. Of course, anybody who has been in the publishing field knows that nothing is free. But, of course, anybody who has been around Open Access journals knows that there are problems, like the one that John Bohannon highlighted in [Sciencemag.org](http://www.sciencemag.org). Bohannon: “[over the past 10 months, I have submitted 304 versions of the wonder drug paper to open-access journals. More than half of the journals accepted the paper, failing to notice its fatal flaws. Beyond that headline result, the data from this sting operation reveal the contours of an emerging Wild West in academic publishing.” [\[http://www.sciencemag.org/content/342/6154/60.full\]](http://www.sciencemag.org/content/342/6154/60.full) Is Open Access just going through adolescence? Or, is something more sinister going on? Many of my colleagues worry about their print and online articles being embargoed due to the caprices of consortiums—especially their power to select and bundle journals in packages for university libraries. What about the question of publicly funded universities and the access taxpayers should have to the research that they fund? Let me slow down for a second; maybe the problems of consortiums and taxes are a bit off-topic, but these sorts of issues send my head spinning [full disclosure: nano is an Open Access journal]. Are there endemic problems to Open Access structure? Or, is there something else at work in Open Access that people are missing?

MY: What a good question. I love Open Access as an idea. It acknowledges the fact that authors of academic articles are the primary beneficiaries of the publication process and should carry the costs of it instead of readers. However, I think the proponents of Open Access have poorly executed the idea in practice.

It is true that universities and governments have funded the research, but who should fund the publication costs? By that I mean peer review, copyediting, typesetting, and marketing. The initial solution has been for Open Access publishers to cut out these vital functions that a traditional publishers still offer. This is one of the main causes of Open Access's poor start.

The second reason is that traditional publishers who have the skills and resources have taken a defensive stand against Open Access. Their initial charges for including OA articles within existing subscription journals were too high. And, traditionally publishers who have recently embraced (some aspects) of Open Access have not supported such publications with the same kind of investments they normally give their subscription products.

At my own publishing company Intellect we have also been slow to launch an Open Access product as we have tried to find a business model that could result in a product that would match the standards of our subscription journals and still be financially sustainable.

We began by agreeing that our authors could host their pre-press (post peer review but pre copyediting stage) on their university repositories for free access without any time embargo. We then offered an Open Access option within our existing subscription journals for around \$1000 per article. While this is a lower price than others have offered, it still too high for our community. Therefore, the uptake has been low.

In 2014, Intellect will offer its first full Open Access publication, a move that we hope will answer the problems that we have identified with OA. We will basically offer the same service that we offer with our subscription journals for about \$300 per article. We shall have a printed version of each issue of our OA journal as well as the online version. Either the author or their institution pays for this article cost: this will not be a cost to the reader or the library.

In my view, this model would distinguish our adventure from others. I am a strong believer in print as it brings with it a long heritage of a commitment to quality. When you know there is only one chance to get it right with print, you will do your darn best as a publisher to get it right. I also think that some libraries may subscribe to the print edition at \$50 per volume and thus helping to offset costs. Contributors will get a free issue in which they are published and can buy extra copies at a modest price.

The bulk of our anticipated income from OA is to be generated via a \$50 submission fee. We are planning to pay \$40 of this as a fee to the referee of each article and use the rest for administrative overhead. I know that a submission fee is not standard in the humanities in the States, but in my view it allows the introduction a fee to peer reviewers that is much needed if we have large numbers of submissions to deal with it.

To make the project viable in the long run, we plan to invest \$75,000 in order to cover loses in the first two years. This is roughly what we invest in a new subscription journal. It is important to note that our subscription journals look to recover that size of investment by the end of their fifth volume. However, with Open Access we have no idea if we can recover that amount on that schedule. So, our target is launch one new Open Access product per year, while we maintain our number of new subscription journals at eight each year.

SS: Your last answer contains a lot of information, yet it also raises the specter of the unknown. I would like to end our interview by going further into the unknown, by delving into the future. If you were able to look ten years into the future, what do you think publishing and reviewing will look like? Will pre-publishing review and post-publishing review coexist in harmony? Will a new type of review system gain prominence? Will open access transform keyed access?

MY: I think academic publishing will evolve at a very slow pace. I have examples of articles written 10 years ago predicting the end of subscription journals and a golden age of Open

Access by now. But we are still talking about the same issues while journal publishing in particular has not changed much. There are still some big publishers who overcharge for their services and get away with it due to the monopoly they have on a well-established brand. At the same time, medium size publishers like us are trying to make a difference.

I think the following quotation from “Alternative futures for academic and professional publishing,” by Alastair Dryburgh, presents a valid point now and may still have a valid point in another ten years:

A particular factor for journal publishing is the high levels of profit currently achieved. It may be that new developments offer a return that is attractive for those looking at standard capital market benchmarks, but not those currently invested in the old model. Existing publishers may need to reset their profit expectations, with considerable pain, shock and anger from their stakeholders, or see their business taken over by others who can accept lower returns. [*Learned Publishing* 16 (2003): 265-270]