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Co-operating for gold OA without APCs | Martin Paul Eve



# Co-operating for gold open access without APCs

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While article processing charges (APCs) are emerging as a key way in which existing publishers can adapt to gold open access (OA), this mode is problematic in many ways. Considering the existing subscription publication ecosystem as a risk/cost-pooling mechanism leads to the conclusion that APCs are a concentration of risk that may come with damaging institutional consequences, particularly in the humanities disciplines. Consortial and co-operative modes of funding gold OA, however, do not come with these drawbacks but are susceptible to 'free riders'. In this article, the theoretical backdrop to these models is addressed and the range of current offerings evaluated. Noting that classical economic incentives do not seem to operate in a world of inter-library loans, the article ends with a description of the model that is being implemented for the *Open Library of Humanities* initiative, funded by the Andrew W Mellon Foundation.

The current transition to gold open access (OA) through the implementation of an author- or institution-facing charge (an article or book processing charge: APC or BPC) is based upon two key flawed assumptions that are particularly acute in the humanities disciplines.

The first of these assumptions is that a market will emerge in which rational actors (researchers) will develop price sensitivity in the selection of their publication venue. This is the line of the UK government. However, as we see in the market for shoes, for example, various manufacturers of trainers manage to sell the same essential product, often made by the same workers from the same material, with wild price differentiation. In other words, in markets that deal with symbolic capital (prestige or reputation), perceived value is little to do with the services or goods provided, but instead wholly concerned with the brand that is valued by one's peers. To believe that price for the actual service rendered would trump this perceived brand-value will remain a naïve position while scholarly communication retains its dual roles in dissemination *and* assessment.<sup>1</sup>

The second assumption is that APCs and BPCs are simply a straightforward substitution of the point of payment to the supply side of the economic system. The problem with this assumption, though, is that the economics of risk have been inadequately modelled for the proposed APC set-up in contrast to the current subscription set-up. The most common way of conceiving of the subscription and sales environment that we have had so far is as one where we are 'paying to read'. We buy material so that we have access and we exclude those who don't pay. There is another way of thinking about this, however. This model is also one where, as a group, we all pay a relatively modest amount in order to subsidise the work of publishers. This is particularly the case in the instance of mission-orientated publishers, like university presses, who often do not make huge profits and combine subscription revenues from many institutions so that they can continue to publish work. In other words, subscriptions and sales act as a risk pool. There may well be problems in conceiving of this as a market – after all, there is little rationality and a high level of monopoly, as well as the fact that it operates on an exclusionary model that is antithetical to the dissemination claims of publishers – but it is a model whereby a large number of institutions bear the cost of publishing *all* the material that appears in a journal or in a book list.



MARTIN PAUL EVE  
Lecturer in English Literature  
University of Lincoln

'The current transition to gold OA ... is based upon two key flawed assumptions'

The same is not true of article and book processing charges. This new environment may look rosy for institutions that do not produce much, or any, research. After all, they have no researchers for whom they have to pay. This is not the case, though, for research-intensive institutions or for younger institutions with smaller budgets that wish to break into the research-intensive groupings. In each of these cases, a subscription will work out far cheaper at the local level than a switch to direct author-facing payments. Indeed, even with offsetting measures in a hybrid environment that are designed to make this a transition, the costs are located at different places in an APC/BPC model. Of course, there is enough money in the system if we were to theoretically transition immediately to pay for all the publication that we have to be OA and if redistributions were put into place. The funds are not, though, distributed evenly throughout the world's universities. At the moment this is manifest in an access crisis. In an APC/BPC model, it will be evident on the supply side, particularly in the humanities disciplines. This explains the widespread resistance to this model within those fields: if researchers feel the need to publish in specific venues with specific access requirements and the economics are not in their favour, they feel the effects directly.

To put this all somewhat differently, though, what is actually happening here is that we have devised a way of kidding ourselves, to some degree. When justifying expenditure from the library budget in a supposedly competitive market, we need to conceive of what we are doing under classical economic incentive theorisations: 'we are buying this publication as a commodity object so that our researchers can read it'. We really know, though, that what we are actually doing is collectively paying for the labour of publishing as a service, which we can achieve far more easily if we spread the risk. The fact that we have inter-library loan services and librarians who are committed to spreading knowledge without payment indicates the disjunct between the idea of paying individually and feeling a grudge at giving the fruit of that purchase to others who have not paid. In other words, 'free riders', deemed problematic in classical economic theory, are not so amid the strange market contours of the academic library and scholarly communication communities.

'we are actually ... collectively paying for the labour of publishing as a service'

## Precedents for consortially funded open access

This is not just theoretical speculation; we have concrete demonstrations that consortial purchasing for OA is desired by library communities. We also have real evidence that free riders are no hindrance to such schemes working, so long as a sufficient number of institutions participate. How else, after all, to explain the continued funding of arXiv or mass participation in Knowledge Unlatched? ArXiv's well-known revenue model, for instance, is one in which 'Cornell University Library (CUL), the Simons Foundation, and a global collective of institutional members support ArXiv financially'.<sup>2</sup> For the sustainability of arXiv, 'each member institution pledges a five-year funding commitment to support arXiv. Based on institutional usage ranking, the annual fees are set in four tiers from \$1,500-\$3,000. Cornell's [the host of arXiv] goal is to raise \$300,000 per year through membership fees generated by approximately 126 institutions'.<sup>3</sup> While such a model is entirely susceptible to free riders, the project notes that 'arXiv's sustainability should be considered a shared investment in a culturally embedded resource that provides unambiguous value to a global network of science researchers. Any system of voluntary contribution is susceptible to free-riders, but arXiv is extremely cost-effective, so even modest contributions from heavy-user institutions will support continued open access for all while providing good value-for-money when compared with subscription services'.<sup>4</sup>

This may be all well and good in the case of a heavily used preprint server with concrete usage metrics known in advance, but what about extending such thinking to full publication and selection? Moves are afoot. Rebecca Kennison and Lisa Norberg, for instance, have proposed a model for the humanities under which there would be a central fund, created by 'an annual or multi-year payment made by every institution of higher education', for which '[i]nstitutions and scholarly societies come together

'a model for the humanities ... "an annual or multi-year payment made by every institution of higher education"'

75 in partnership to apply [...] through a competitive grant process'.<sup>5</sup> While there are many details of a practical implementation of this precise model that are yet to be decided (and I might query whether we want more competitive grant processes), the principle is similar. By collaborating, irrespective of free riders, we gain extraordinary value for money and can achieve gold OA by spreading risk, as we currently do for subscription publication. All that we have done is remove the thinking that says we are only willing to pay for a direct, individual return. That is not what is happening anyway, so let us strip that from our discourse.

Such thinking is not, though, radically new. Hugh Look and Frances Pinter first proposed the model for Knowledge Unlatched back in 2010. This pilot, which eventually gained just under 300 participating libraries, was based on the reasoning that 'if, say 1,000 libraries paid into a fund that "bought" the non-commercial open access rights to a book that carried, for the sake of the arithmetic, a "getting to first copy" cost of \$10,000, then each library would contribute \$10.00. The average monograph today costs approximately \$80.00. This would not only get libraries eight times as many titles online, it would be truly contributing to making knowledge accessible globally. If, say 5,000 libraries subscribed to the scheme (although we feel this is unlikely) the cost would be \$2.00 a title, representing a 97.5% reduction on the current print or eBook price.'<sup>6</sup>

But 2010 was only the start. Sanford G Thatcher notes the close affinity between these consortial mechanisms and the description furnished by Adrian Johns of 17th-century practice: 'another option, of increasing importance after 1660, was to publish by subscription ... It involved persuading a number of prosperous individuals to invest enough money in the proposed publication that the project would be sufficiently capitalized to proceed to completion'.<sup>7,8</sup> What has changed since then is not the view that the furtherance of the Enlightenment project is best advanced by the broadest dissemination of research; this remains as key as ever. It is rather the economic systems to which we are willing to rationalize our commitment.

## The Open Library of Humanities

Free riders or not, there is a hunger among the library community for new models, often not-for-profit, that address the economic and social challenges of gold OA. In the remainder of this piece, I will describe the steps we are taking with, and the progress towards the launch of, the Open Library of Humanities (OLH), of which I am a co-founder. Beginning with an Andrew W Mellon Foundation planning grant, this platform aims to provide a transition to gold OA for journals in the humanities without any author-facing charges.

'Free riders or not, there is a hunger among the library community for new models'

The OLH, which I co-direct with Dr Caroline Edwards, has two distinct topological components.

The first component, the OLH Megajournal, is a multi-disciplinary space for any researcher who identifies his or her practice as falling within 'the humanities'. Although not a 'megajournal' in the *PLOS-ONE* sense of 'peer-review light' (in which 'technical soundness' becomes the core determinant for admission), this broad space is an area where the approximately 150 researchers who have pledged us articles can submit their new work. Of course, we cannot guarantee that all 150 pledges will be received. We can guarantee that not all of these will pass peer review. The end result, though, at launch, should be a sizeable tranche of initial material across a wide disciplinary spread.

The second component is the provision of a space for individual journals to share in our economy of scale. These existing publications can transfer onto the OLH and we will provide, through our partnership with Ubiquity Press, a dedicated editorial manager, a hosting platform, a submission management system, XML typesetting, digital preservation, COPE membership and CrossRef DOI assignment. Each journal may keep its own branding and autonomy over its peer-review practices. There are two possible routes for a journal's inclusion. The first is the standard admission route. In this route, in collaboration with the

76 academic director, a proposal is put to the academic and library boards. This must then pass a resolution of quality control from the academic steering committee and a resolution of budgetary increase from the library board. This route may only be available at certain times as publication costs are borne solely by the OLH library consortium. In this mode, there are no costs to journals or authors. The second route is self-funded quality-assessed admission. In this mode, those journals that pass a quality-control decision and that have funds to cover their own publication costs for a period of time (usually three years at approximately US\$500 per article), in whole or in part, may transition to the collective funding pool at the end of this period. This route is subject to satisfactory quality requirements, along with an internal financial assessment, and is available solely at the discretion of the academic directors.

It is also well known that books, and particularly the research monograph, form a far more important component within the humanities ecosystem. To that end, it is vital that the OLH pursues routes by which these crucial outputs can also be made accessible freely over the web. In this instance, if we achieve sufficient library participation (see below) and it is desirable to our library members, we are in discussions with Cambridge University Press, Oxford University Press, Harvard University Press and Open Book Publishers to work on the cross-subsidy of OA books.

The economic model that we have assembled for this initiative is one wherein a moderate number of libraries agree to pay an initial rate of ~US\$1000 each (with appropriate banding in some countries). These libraries are not paying for access to the material. Neither are they paying for their own researchers to publish. Instead, they are paying to do things a better way and to have a governance stake in the project. By pooling resources while re-conceiving the relationship between a not-for-profit, mission-orientated and scholar-led publisher and the library, an economy of scale is possible that is simply not there under individualist modes of purchase.<sup>9</sup> In return, library members are given a seat on the library budget board, which makes quarterly decisions on journal admission through an online platform. Library participants are also prominently acknowledged during the submission process and, should the institution wish, in a standalone press release on the homepage.

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So far, the model is on track to work. While there are challenges ahead – the anticipated and dreaded year two and three drop-off, for instance – if we and our participating libraries can ride out the launch period, we should have an ongoing basis for a transition. With the offer for societies to come aboard our model, we hope also to see direct cancellations for participating libraries allowing them to support OA without the additional financial burden inherent in other models for transition. We hope you will join us.<sup>10</sup>

Competing interests: As openly stated in the article, the author is co-founder of The Open Library of Humanities.

## References and notes

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Martin Paul Eve  
 Lecturer in English Literature  
 University of Lincoln, Brayford Pool, Lincoln LN6 7TS, UK  
 E-mail: martin@martineve.com

ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-00002-5589-8511>

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