

How can we achieve sustainable funding for open access books?

Is the biggest blocker to open access (OA) for books actually the economics of it all? Book processing charges (BPCs) do not scale but they remain a significant method of paying to produce OA monographs for many researchers and libraries. However, in the last few years, we have seen several new initiatives emerge that seek to solve the problem posed by funding via BPCs alone. There is a proliferation of collective funding models for OA books, including Opening the Future, Open Book Collective, MIT Press's D2O, JSTOR's Path to Open and others. They all work differently, but they all offer alternatives to BPCs. In this article we explore the theme of sustainable funding for OA monographs, presenting a range of new models, and suggest that their normalization is well overdue. We also present the work of the library at Lancaster University on their new strategy supporting open access. While this article takes a somewhat UK-centric path, what is happening in the UK may be replicated in other countries and contexts. With demand increasing for monographs to be open this is a timely topic. The authors welcome discussion from publishers, libraries and other stakeholders.

Keywords

open access; monographs; diamond models; libraries; sustainable funding; Copim



TOM GRADY
Copim Co-Lead
Birkbeck
University of London



ELAINE SYKES
Head of Open
Research
Lancaster University



MARTIN PAUL EVE
Professor of
Literature,
Technology and
Publishing
Birkbeck
University of London

Open access for monographs: challenges and opportunities

Our central question in this article is simple, but has no simple answer: if we are going to do open access (OA) for scholarly monographs (we will talk about why that is a good idea in just a moment) then how do we move away from relying on big grants or scraps and leftover funds at the end of the year? In other words, how does scholarly publishing achieve real sustainability for funding OA books? How do we normalize and make open the default expenditure from library budgets?

'how does scholarly publishing achieve real sustainability for funding OA'

But we will take a moment first to talk about the context of this question. We highlight some of the opportunities and challenges in OA for monographs and mention in particular some collaborative approaches on which the Copim Community¹ has been working. We also spotlight work that the library at Lancaster University has been doing as part of their strategic support for open access.

So why do we think OA for monographs is a good idea and why is now a good time to be talking about this?

Firstly, the possibilities for global dissemination and increased citation when publishing OA are already well documented. While many articles and reports have studied the OA citation advantage, Mithu Lucraft's summary on the LSE Impact Blog, 'Open Access to academic books creates larger, more diverse and more equitable readerships',² puts it well. In this piece she notes that her analysis showed a 'robust [OA] 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.'

In addition, industry reports examining the state of scholarly publishing have identified that traditional sales of humanities and social science academic books are declining – and yet we are still working as a sector in much the same way we always have, largely based on a print paradigm. According to the Ithaka S+R Print Revenue and Open Access Monographs³ report from September 2023, written in collaboration with the Association of University Presses, there has been a 'decline in monograph sales over the last couple of decades, [and] margins on academic books are so thin that publishers may fear that anything that threatens to cannibalize anticipated print sales of a scholarly title ... is a threat to its viability'. (Interestingly, the same report goes on to conclude in its Key Insights that 'OA titles can generate significant print revenue [and] OA titles can generate meaningful digital revenue'.)

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Furthermore, as far back as 2017, a comprehensive AHRC/British Library report, 'Academic Books and their Future',⁴ warned that 'publishers are concerned that their e-book revenues do not adequately fill the gap left by declining print sales [while] libraries chafe at the costs of many of the choices they have to make'. So, the scholarly publishing world is changing. Again. We argue, therefore, that the HE sector needs to adapt to this changing world and that open access is a factor in those changes. It is certainly a factor when the scholarly work has been publicly funded and the labour involved in writing and reviewing has been given willingly by scholars.

And on the horizon of this shifting landscape, we are now seeing a number of policies and mandates appearing around OA for monographs too. One of the earliest appeared back in 2013 from the Wellcome Trust⁵ but today there are policies from funders in the Netherlands, Austria, Norway, Ireland, Slovenia and Portugal, among others (see 'Overview of existing OA book policies from cOAlitionS'⁶ for a longer list). The Council of the European Union (EU) said in May 2023 that 'immediate and unrestricted open access should be the norm in publishing research involving public funds, with transparent pricing',⁷ and in the UK a new OA policy went live in January 2024, which includes an open-access requirement for monographs funded by UKRI (the national funding agency investing in research in the UK). The funding body even allocated £3.5 million a year towards helping to pay publishing costs and specifically supports non-author-facing routes to compliance – something we will talk about more, later in this article. At the time of writing, the UK funding body Research England concluded a sector-wide consultation regarding a possible OA component for monographs in the next Research Excellence Framework (REF) exercise. It was announced that an OA mandate would not be part of the current REF cycle but that 'an open access requirement for submission of longform outputs will be in place for the next assessment exercise, with implementation from 1 January 2029'.⁸ This will be a particularly interesting development to watch because such a mandate in the REF would not necessarily come with any money to help researchers pay to publish OA in the way the UKRI policy does.

'the HE sector needs to adapt to this changing world and ... open access is a factor in those changes'

All of which brings us to a central point and what we think is the biggest challenge – the economics of it all. How to pay for this transition to open access for monographs in such a way that is fair and sustainable for both libraries and publishers? Also, how to maintain

bibliodiversity in the move to OA? The scholarly publishing landscape is a varied one, comprising large and small players, commercial and non-profit, publishing embedded within the university and publishing external to the academy – policies and mandates need to consider that flipping to OA books will present different challenges to these different parts of the sector. This is particularly the case when funding is inequitably distributed, with some universities filing substantial deficits and others resting on significant endowments. At the time of writing, 60 UK universities have open redundancy schemes⁹ of one kind or another. It is a challenging time for OA funding. But one thing we can do is to look at OA revenue models in action elsewhere. For example, we could look to the journal world, where open access has been an acceptable publication format for many years and where there are many mature and embedded models for publishing or depositing articles openly.

The problem with book processing charges

However, in the journal world, the most embedded and the most dominant model for funding the production of open articles is the ‘author-pays’ model, or article processing charge (APC). The problem with the APC is that in removing barriers to readers it instead erects a barrier to authors. That is not ideal, and paying is not even an option for many authors. When you look at the book equivalent – the book processing charge (BPC) – it gets even more complicated: books cost a lot more to produce and BPCs do not scale up well. They also privilege funded researchers, wealthy institutions and established academics on permanent contracts,¹⁰ and they concentrate costs on specific research projects. That is not good value for money from a funder point of view. And from the perspective of a publisher needing a reliable revenue stream year on year, the BPC is not sustaining the press as a whole: it does not sustain the underlying infrastructure of running a press, it just pays to produce the one book. Now, this is not to say there is no place for using BPCs at all; if an author’s funder has included publication costs in their grant, for example, or if the book is particularly costly or specialized to produce, then BPCs can work effectively. The point is that if per-book-charges become the dominant model for funding OA monographs, in much the same way APCs have for articles, then we have a problem.

‘BPCs ... privilege funded researchers, wealthy institutions and established academics on permanent contracts’

As an example, take the £3.5 million a year that UKRI has set aside to support their policy.¹¹ That means any researcher funded by UKRI that has to publish OA under the new mandate can access these funds to make it happen (their institution accesses it on their behalf and arranges payment to the publisher). If we take the average BPC to be around £10,000 (though it is often higher than that¹²) and if we take the estimated number of UKRI-funded works to be around 320 books and 1,600 chapters, we end up with a total potential BPC cost of £6.4 million per year. That is nearly twice the ring-fenced amount set aside by UKRI. Returning to the REF for a moment, back in 2018 Martin Paul Eve et al. calculated¹³ that the resources needed to make all of the books for the REF open access by BPC alone would be £19 million per year and the REF might not come with a block grant like UKRI’s, although their article suggested hypothecation of quality-related research (QR) funding as a viable option. However, if this money is not forthcoming, not many of us would find that amount down the back of the sofa.

‘funding a transition to open access monographs using per-book charges alone is financially impossible’

This is just one UK-based example, but the point is that funding a transition to open access monographs using per-book charges alone is financially impossible. More often than not, arts, humanities and social science researchers just do not have access to the resources needed for a £10,000 BPC, and, at the time of writing, £10,000 is beginning to seem like the lower end of the scale at some publishers. For example, a recent conversation on social media¹⁴ referenced a discussion on a closed OA repository LISTSERV mailing list where an author had been quoted £19,000 for a standard monograph. (As an aside, bear in mind of course that a BPC is not a cost, it is a price charged by the publisher). Several publishers have been transparent about their production costs and it is hard to see how almost £20,000 for a single book can be justified when, for example, Open Book Publishers – a highly regarded born-OA press – has noted that their

4 'average "first copy" cost of production is £5,266 per title'.¹⁵ It is possible that some of the higher BPCs are actually attempts to recoup infrastructural, staffing and other indirect costs – what can be frustrating is the lack of transparency in articulating these to the libraries that are being asked to pay.¹⁶

So, the sector needs other revenue models to work alongside per-book cost models, and we argue that we need libraries actively to engage with these other models so that we do not end up with five commercial mega-publishers vacuuming up nearly all the available resources, as has happened in the journal world.¹⁷

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In a scenario where a handful of very large commercial players come to dominate OA monograph publishing there is also a risk that the small, mission-led and university presses are squeezed out. In this context, OA mandates and policies could backfire; in trying to push the sector more quickly towards OA, policies could inadvertently make life very difficult for smaller publishers if they do not have a funding mechanism of their own, leading to a dominance of the big players. So, what exactly are the other funding mechanisms out there? We highlight some alternative revenue models below.

The 'old' traditional print sales model for books was actually a pretty good way to fund publishing, spreading costs among many libraries that each bought individual single copies. Those purchases, collectively, meant the publisher had enough revenue to bring out new titles and conduct business. Some of the new OA revenue models are not that different in a sense, in that they also pool small individual payments from libraries to collectively fund publishing activities. In the Copim Community we often talk about three strata of non-BPC collective funding models that we have seen emerge since 2020.

Some non-BPC collective models

At one end of the strata there is a group of a few small, academic-led presses that have been at the forefront of implementing new models for OA that do not rely solely on BPCs – their revenue models are based on a pooling of individual payments. Presses like Open Book Publishers (OBP)¹⁸ and punctum books¹⁹ have been running successful membership schemes for some time, whereby libraries contribute small annual fees, which collectively add up to enough to allow those presses to publish whatever they need openly. These are diamond OA models that do not require fees from authors or readers, and they have been working successfully for more than 15 years.

At the other end of the strata, there are larger, well-established university presses like MIT Press²⁰ and University of Michigan Press²¹ who have launched membership systems with a subscription component. They give generous 'term access' to their backlist content, and if a certain number of library members sign up, their frontlist is flipped to open in whole or in part. Bloomsbury Academic²² recently launched a conditional, backlist-based model which opens up a portion of their frontlist titles if thresholds are met, and other initiatives have arisen like JSTOR's Path to Open²³ with a stable of big-name academic publishers on board. There are pros and cons to all these models, depending on library strategies and budgets: high thresholds might mean not as many books go OA as the press or library members would like, and long embargo periods (as with Path to Open) mean not all OA books are compliant with some policies.

But somewhere in the middle of all these there is a disparate group of small- to medium-sized academic presses, sometimes subsidized by host institutions but not always, some of them even scholar-led, but all depending on bringing in revenue for their own survival. These presses might find it difficult to transition to open access in a low-risk, sustainable manner and this is where much of Copim's work has been focused. We highlight below two initiatives launched and run by the Copim Community.

Open Book Collective

The Open Book Collective (OBC)²⁴ has developed a website and platform where libraries can easily find open access presses in one place (or presses moving towards being fully OA). The site is a one-stop shop that makes it easy for libraries to find these publishers and sign up to their membership schemes, supporting the presses financially without the need for per-book fees. It is a community-governed concept: each press that joins the collective has a say at the table in how the collective is run. So, the OBC has strength in numbers: pooling ideas, expertise and money.

'a one-stop shop that makes it easy for libraries to find these publishers and sign up to their membership schemes'

Opening the Future

The Opening the Future (OtF)²⁵ revenue model was devised as a mechanism for small- to medium-sized scholarly publishers that were not born-OA. These presses may have been around for years, some of them even publishing for decades before open access was a well-known concept. It is a simple mechanism: libraries subscribe to a specially priced and specially selected package of closed books from the publisher's backlist, and the press then uses their fees to only produce new open access frontlist monographs. Again, it is a collective model pooling small contributions from many libraries so that no single institution bears a disproportionate burden, and the new OA books are free for authors and free for readers.

It would be naive to pretend that Direct to Open, or Path to Open, the Open Book Collective or Opening the Future etc. alone are the answer to everything. But then, nor are BPCs the only answer and, ultimately, funding OA monographs will require mixed models, experimentation and sector (financial) engagement.

'a collective model pooling small contributions from many libraries so that no single institution bears a disproportionate burden'

The Copim Community is working to push for change based around collective diamond models. We urge libraries to sustain presses that publish in the fields where scholars want to research and teach. We urge libraries to work with these presses to implement these innovative collective models so that authors who come to a press with a book proposal will be able to publish without having to pay author-facing fees.

That is much better value for money, and is a better situation for scholarship in general, for academic freedom and for policy-compliant venues of publication. One thing is for sure, if we want a different outcome, we need to do something different: if everyone sits back and waits to see which models are going to work then the models will fail and we will be left with something very similar to the current unsustainable APC situation in the journal world.

Lancaster University perspective

The debate on how best to facilitate open access monographs has, to date, focused on gold versus green, with the expense and conditions of the former being compared to the feasibility and desirability of the latter. This can manifest as 'authors versus budget holders' because authors' preference for gold contrasts with budget holders' need to finance OA publishing, which can be extortionate. In engaging in this binary debate though, we are potentially ignoring a solution that we are all crying out for – alternatively funded monograph publishing models. This has been the thinking at Lancaster University, a research-intensive, mid-size university based in the North of England. For some time now, we have recognized the need to be more strategic in our approach to funding alternative publishing models and to effectively 'put our money where our mouth is' with regard to diversifying the publishing landscape.

As a result, we have been considering the operational and strategic implications of this ambition. Immediately and operationally, this meant investing in such initiatives and infrastructure and we do endeavour to support as much as we can. It has been relatively easy thus far, when budgets were available and there were leftover funds at year-end that needed spending. Thanks to the current financial climate however, this is no longer the

case. Lancaster University, in common with many other UK universities, is facing financial challenges and will need to make savings in the forthcoming years, including to its library budget. The temptation is always to cut what is relatively easy to cut and initiatives such as the Open Book Collective, where the benefit is more a 'community good' than a tangible output may seem like easy pickings. We consider this to be the wrong approach, however, and are increasingly frustrated at not being able to invest more in initiatives like these because, instead, we are paying millions to commercial publishers who have tied us into multi-year deals or are charging ever more exorbitant fees for publishing, as well as being weighted more towards STEM subjects.

Therefore, a more strategic, broader approach is required. At Lancaster this has manifested itself in several ways. Firstly, ironically the financial crisis may have given us the opportunity to start reviewing our institutional spend on content and publishing in a much more radical way. We are reviewing all of our read and publish deals and conducting analyses to determine whether there are any that we should cancel. No deal is too big to not be considered, and financial metrics will not be the only determinant, but ethical and equitable concerns will be included in these reviews as well.

This will also lead us to initiate honest conversations with our researcher community regarding the costs of publishing which have now reached a tipping point in terms of affordability. Historically, we have been more apprehensive about such conversations, seeing our role as service providers, there to facilitate the publishing requirements of the research community without feeling able to offer advice on alternatives. More recently, however, we have reframed our role to that as partner with the confidence in our own professional knowledge and experience to offer informed judgements regarding the wider publishing landscape.

'the financial crisis may have given us the opportunity to start reviewing our institutional spend on content and publishing in a much more radical way'

That is not to say that such conversations are easy, and we need to ensure that we are realistic about the current situation. We are highly mindful that we should not be seen to be in any way dictating where authors should be publishing. Prestige is still a huge issue in the academic publishing world, and we would be naive (and doomed to failure) if we ignored this. Researchers are often in precarious positions regarding employment status and future career prospects. They tell us time and again that where they publish matters as much as what they publish, despite all the progress that the Declaration on Research Assessment has made.²⁶ In addition, they frequently are competing in international employment markets where prestige is an even more dominant factor than it is in the UK. As a result, when suggesting that they publish with a less 'prestigious' press, we are potentially asking them to risk their personal careers for the promise of an intangible 'better' future publishing landscape. That is a big ask!

Consequently, we are taking a long-term view and targeting those at the start and end of their careers, as well as seeking out early adopters. One example of how we are targeting early career researchers (ECRs) is by offering them an opportunity to publish their first monograph via an initiative called Trailblazers, developed in partnership with the Universities of Liverpool and Salford and Liverpool University Press.²⁷ This not only pays for the open access publishing of the ECR's first monograph but also offers them a range of masterclasses to help them understand both the publishing process and the wider benefits of open access publishing.

'we are targeting early career researchers ... by offering them an opportunity to publish their first monograph via an initiative called Trailblazers'

We are also in discussions with researchers who have securer employment and are more established in their careers. This approach is still somewhat embryonic and reliant upon capitalizing on existing good relationships but has had some initial interest from researchers who are looking to either create something more innovative or who are engaged with open access and seeking more ethical, non-profit driven publishers.

We are also mindful of the need to take a more joined-up approach throughout the library and to close the loop between what we are publishing and what we are reading. The rise of open access was supposed to redirect our budgets from paying to access content to paying to publish instead. In reality however, that has not happened. This is in part due to an exponential growth in global research outputs, including from countries with a less strong OA mandate than the UK, and so we find ourselves still needing to pay for access to these resources. However, that is not the sole reason. It is also true that too often the paid versions of articles have been easily accessible, even when an OA alternative exists, due to libraries carrying numerous subscriptions. Given the current financial climate however, such easy access may no longer be sustainable, thereby fuelling a greater demand for OA resources. As a result, we need to work with our library and academic colleagues to review reading lists for open access content or suggest open access alternatives where appropriate.

Conclusion

We as libraries need to act as a community. We frequently highlight the community aspect of initiatives such as Copim and we hail it as good. We need to now reciprocate and as a community commit to prioritizing investment in the kinds of publishers and initiatives that we want to see continue and flourish. Collectively we invest millions of pounds into the publishing ecosystem. If we were to coordinate our approaches and investments then, surely, between us we can facilitate longer-term, sustainable investment in these types of models. The Research Libraries UK (RLUK) Content Strategy Network has already made some strides towards doing exactly that by drafting principles for selecting such models and collecting data regarding existing investments to help understand where there is crossover.

We need to take a long-term view to achieving this change. One of the reasons there is so much apathy in this area is that we as a sector are constantly looking for a silver bullet that will instantly solve all the problems we are experiencing with the current situation. That, we would argue, is why we have not yet seen the cultural change that we are looking for – and need. The proverb ‘the best time to plant a tree was twenty years ago; the second-best time is now’ feels very appropriate to this situation. This is not an easy task to undertake. Culture change is one of the hardest things for any institution to implement and takes significant time to achieve. But collectively we have the power and the influence to enact the change that we want to see. It is one thing to try and not succeed, but if we do not even try, we are quitting before we have even started. Besides, honestly, can we afford not to?

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

A list of the abbreviations and acronyms used in this and other *Insights* articles can be accessed here – click on the URL below and then select the ‘full list of industry A&As’ link: <http://www.uksg.org/publications#aa>.

Competing interests

The authors have declared no competing interests.

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Corresponding author:

Tom Grady

Copim Co-Lead

Birkbeck

University of London, UK

E-mail: t.grady@bbk.ac.uk

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1888-947X>

Co-authors:

Elaine Sykes

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5488-5858>

Martin Paul Eve

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5589-8511>

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