

How can we afford Open Access in the humanities disciplines?

Open Access publishing needs new business models for universities and disciplines that want to support Open Access but are short on resources. Martin Paul Eve explains how the Open Library of Humanities has pioneered an inexpensive and efficient approach for Open Access publishing with the support of many universities in Europe and beyond.

Open Access has an economic problem. Whereas the subscription system distributed costs between hundreds if not thousands of universities, Open Access publishing models often concentrate the entire costs on a single point in the system: the authors, their institution, or their funders. In disciplines where project funding is scarcer – such as the humanities and social sciences – this problem is more acute as university library budgets must bear new costs on outgoing articles as well as continued subscription costs. The system of article processing charges is deterring humanists from openly disseminating their work. The [Open Library of Humanities](#) (OLH) has worked to solve this. As a not-for-profit, mission-driven publisher hosted by Birkbeck, University of London, we work differently and provide a low-cost, high-return way for universities to support Open Access in these disciplines.

Instead of charging an author per article, OLH is supported by [a coalition of approximately 300 university libraries worldwide](#). These institutions pay a small membership fee every year so that we can operate the platform. The fee is *not* an article processing charge; it is an organisational support fee that allows us to continue our operations. The price of this fee is less than a single article processing charge from the commercial publishers and it is banded proportionately depending on the country and size of the institution. With this funding stream, we never need to charge authors or institutions when they publish. For authors, it appears free, while maintaining a commitment to high-quality, peer-reviewed research – just Open Access. For libraries and universities, it is low cost with potentially large benefits. And we achieve a better distribution of costs than with article processing charges. We have therefore treated publishing as an *infrastructure*, rather than as a service per article.

We have been running for five years and the statistics are good. Originally funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the system is now financially independent and sustainable. We publish 27 peer-reviewed journals and are bigger than a small university press. We are supported by university libraries at Harvard, Cambridge, Oxford, Princeton, Yale, Carnegie Mellon, and many others, right down to small theological colleges.

We have further been working to reduce costs to universities by “flipping” subscription titles to our Open Access model. The [well-known defection](#) of the editorial board at Elsevier’s *Lingua* to a new

title, *Glossa*, is underwritten by our financial model. While negotiations with publishers remain difficult due to Big Deal bundling, such conversions nonetheless help us to transition to an Open Access environment. Over half of our titles were previously subscription journals.

Importantly, we also publish journals for several Learned Societies, such as the International Society for Ethnology and Folklore, the European Architectural History Network, and the Association for Laboratory Phonology, among many others. For societies and authors, the only difference is that their journals are now Gold Open Access, with no charge at any point. In this way, we put scholar- and society-led publishing at the heart of our endeavour.

To solidify our mission and to show that we can achieve Open Access in the humanities, we need to work hand-in-hand with universities and libraries. It costs little and returns a lot. It will also aid us and other initiatives in converting more journals and publishers to similar models, which spreads and reduces costs for all, making Open Access possible in all disciplines. How important is this? David Armitage, the Lloyd C. Blankfein Professor of History at Harvard University, said of OLH: “there is hardly a more important project in train for scholarship in the humanities today.” We hope that you will join us.