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Distributed models for open access publishing: Q&A with Martin Eve

The Open Library of Humanities has demonstrated a model for high-quality open access publishing, without Article Processing Charges. We asked Chief Executive Officer Martin Eve whether the Library could serve as inspiration for Learned Societies in a post-Plan S world.

The latest iteration of the [Plan S guidelines, released on 31 May 2019](#), provides additional clarity on the Plan's support for a diversity of models for moving to open access journals and platforms, stating that the Plan "is NOT just about a publication fee model of Open Access publishing" (emphasis in original). With this in mind, we caught up with Martin Eve, CEO of the [Open Library of Humanities](#), which was launched in 2015 and now publishes 27 open access humanities journals.

How did you get interested in questions of open access?

The first conversation I remember having about access to scholarly material was during my undergraduate degree, when one of my tutors told me that his employment at the university was ending. I suddenly realised that accessing the library and carrying on conducting academic research was a real problem outside of the university environment. By the time I was doing my PhD, it was apparent just how difficult it was to get an academic job in the first place, and I just got more and more incensed that we're expected to produce research articles, often for for-profit corporations, who sell them back to universities, with dire consequences for people who are precariously employed at universities. Those same researchers are expected to be able to produce research that is dependent on having access to other research in order to have secure positions. Everything seemed circular and messed up.

Together with a group of other PhD students, we started a postgraduate journal and I found Open Journal Systems. From Open Journal Systems I discovered the movement for open access and open-source publishing, and it just made so much sense to me. We want education to benefit as many people as possible and to have broader societal impact. Why then are we locking it away? Ever since then I've devoted a lot of time to trying to get research to be open for the benefit of everyone.

You're the founder of the Open Library of Humanities. Can you briefly explain the background to the Library?

It's worth outlining the context of the humanities first: the funding situation is very different to natural sciences. Most funding is provided through ongoing channels or institutional time. We don't usually need big labs and equipment, but this means that we don't have project funding in the same way as the sciences, or big grants that can cover article processing charges (APCs). When I was considering how to expand open access in the humanities, we did an initial poll of humanities researchers to see what funding they could get to cover APCs. The answer was a resounding zero. We needed a different model.

We looked to projects such as arXiv, Knowledge Unlatched – who have been doing this for books – and to an extent to the SCOAP3 purchasing consortium in high-energy physics. We wanted to

explore the possibility of running an ongoing journal publication platform on a library consortium basis; the idea was to get 200-300 libraries to pay what looks like a subscription, but to make the content open access anyway. People thought libraries would freeride, but in the few years we've been operating we've accumulated around 250 libraries who pay us a fee. The fee is not much more than a single article processing charge every year, which goes into a central fund, and we use that funding to publish 27 humanities journals. The costs are thereby distributed rather than based on one point in the system. The turnover is low volume, but it seems to work well for our operation.

What kind of costs were associated with establishing the Library? Throughout this series of interviews we've heard very diverging views on the costs of establishing open online systems.

The costs are not technological, they're mostly social costs. We have an editorial officer who manages editorial workflow, peer review and ethical oversight across our journals. Our journal editors are not compensated, but our editorial officer oversees the process and makes sure that it's running well. We have a marketing officer who spends time getting the word out to libraries. People usually think you don't need marketing in an open access world, but that's totally not true: you need to keep getting the message out there. If I were to start this again, I would include double the marketing budget in the grant proposal, because it's the number one thing that actually gets us financial support. Then we have a part-time administrator and two computer programmers who run our platform. Some of my time goes into it as well. So our biggest cost is our four to five full-time staff members.

We publish around 400 articles per year, and there are costs for typesetting and fees for journals that run on partner platforms (Ubiquity, Liverpool University Press). But essentially the costs are exactly the same as in a print environment: there are social costs to first copy, and then processing costs. I wouldn't say we do things in the cheapest way, but we're really concerned about ensuring we give authors a service that's comparable to a top university press. As a young, new publisher we can be seen as risky, so if academics opt us to give us their work we have to treat it with the utmost respect and make sure they have a really good experience.

What's the feedback from libraries like? Are they getting involved primarily because they want to access individual titles or because they see a value in being part of something bigger?

The most effective way to get a new library to join is when an author who has happily published with us asks their libraries to support us. I think most librarians are happy to have a positive response to open access from a humanities researcher, as it's been so vilified in the humanities because we can't get hold of funding for APCs. Other libraries have strategic priorities to support new business models for open access, for instance in France around 'la bibliodiversité', or for thinking about different models for publication. Others have big budgets. Different libraries ask for different metrics: Some ask how many of their authors have published with us in the past year; some want to know how many researchers accessed our publications within the last year. There are different models for how libraries are appraising whether to support us.

In disciplines where researchers have a lot of funding, should they be paying more? Could we imagine a similar model for the natural sciences?

We already have this model in several areas. The arXiv is funded by a variety of streams, including institutional membership. The institutions that have demonstrated the highest usage pay a fee. It's not a journal publishing platform but it's crucial for lots of disciplines. The SCOAP3 purchasing consortium in particle physics is similar: lots of institutions contribute so that the titles can be purely open-access. That's a profit-driven enterprise, whereas we're strictly not for profit, but it's interesting that the model does already exist in some places.

We were the first to run our own press publishing platform using this model, so people associate it with the funding conditions in the humanities, but there's absolutely no reason why this model shouldn't be applied in other disciplines. I'd like to see more disciplines take it up. People often say that the humanities don't like open access, whereas the sciences do, but actually it's far more nuanced than that. If opposition to open access is an economic question – for instance if societies have problems with revenue when moving to an APC model – then why not think about alternative models that could facilitate open access while preserving disciplinary activities and not centralizing costs in an APC model.

You've [blogged about a consortium funding model for learned societies](#) that publish journals. Are you in touch with any societies?

One of the major concerns for societies is that the subsidy of disciplinary activities from publishing revenue streams could dry up. The model we have looks more like a subscription and could sustain various society activities: you just build the cost into the distributed subsidy. It's about distribution, and our model would work much better for learned societies than an APC system.

I've had a couple of very early stage discussions with learned societies. Otherwise there's been deafening silence, which I find very frustrating. We do have some initiatives moving forward – John Willinsky's anthropology initiative is really valuable, and pay-to-subscribe models (or "subscribe to open") are being put into place, which is heartening. But I'm increasingly frustrated that societies seem able to respond to consultations, such as the one on Plan S, with hugely negative feedback about how the only model they think of for open access – APCs – will cause huge damage, but societies are not coming forward to seek help on how they might transform their business models for open access from people with experience of running other systems. They're often just moaning. Another complaint is that everything is being done far too quickly. But they've had ten years of warnings about this and 20 years since the initial declarations on open access. What timescale would be viable? But the offer still stands: I'm happy to talk to learned societies, as are many others.

A new iteration of the Plan S guidelines have recently been published. Do you still have unanswered questions?

I should state upfront that I am a Plan S ambassador, so not wholly neutral here. In my response to the Plan S consultation I outlined what I wanted addressing. Some of the things are not addressable centrally, but I have questions about the weight and momentum of the different funders that are behind this, which of their schemes are included and how strongly they'll enforce Plan S. The cOAlition S has pledged to be strict, but we don't know what that looks like.

I want to know whether the UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF) in the mid-2020s is to be included. It's a matter of devolved politics, as it's owned by different funding councils, some of whom are signatories and some of whom aren't. That would be a really major transition point, but it's something we don't know. I'd also like to know about monographs, which are hugely important in my discipline, but economically they're difficult to make open access.

What do you think the next 10 years will look like for open access and what do you hope to see?

I'd like to see a normalized assumption that research publishing is open access, and for it to become increasingly uncommon to hit a paywall. I hope paywalled articles will become the weird exception, rather than the other way around. And I hope that, as that happens, the whole controversy around open access will fade away.

What I actually think is that we're going to have far more debates about topics such as licensing and third-party copyright in certain disciplines such as art history. We're going to continue to see opposition. My outlier prediction is that APCs are going to be revealed to be a damaging and useless funding system for universal open access because funds are not distributed evenly between institutions and some people are not going to be able to afford to pay once we make that transition.