

Opening the Future: A New Model for Funding Open Access Monographs

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We outline the work of two university presses, with assistance from the COPIM Project, in building an innovative revenue model to fund Open Access (OA) monographs at a traditional publisher. Building on library journal subscription models and on Knowledge Unlatched's approach to monograph funding, this OA publishing model (called "Opening the Future") gives members special access to a backlist, with the revenue then used to make the frontlist openly accessible. We examine the general landscape of OA and funding models and discuss some of the challenges and benefits.

KEYWORDS open access, monographs, academic publishing, funding models

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BODY OF PAPER

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated, in many ways, the fragility of the humanities and social sciences research publication ecology. As researchers were locked down and out of libraries, publishers scrambled to make research openly accessible. The need for such access was most apparent in the natural sciences, where access to medical research was urgently needed. In the humanities and social sciences (HSS), though, there was a similar unlocking. Researchers in these disciplines keenly felt the benefits of such freely available content. However, the challenge of

recovering from the pandemic is to cement such open publication practices with sustainable business models.

First, though: why is Open Access to monographs even a good or necessary idea? The long form output of the monograph remains the primary way in which the humanities and social sciences communicate their findings.¹ As many natural science disciplines find themselves moving towards an open dissemination model, the humanities and social sciences risk falling behind. The danger lies in an emerging world where all scientific knowledge is freely available to read, while humanistic and social scientific research remains behind paywalls. Such invisibility will only drive prevalent cultural biases against history, literary studies, the classics, and other forms of humanistic and social scientific knowledge. Indeed, if we are to defend the humanities and social sciences, scholarly research in these disciplines must be made openly accessible.²

It is also clear that there is a demand for open scholarship. The Central European University Press made 279 of its monographs freely accessible on Project MUSE from March to June 2020, during the first wave of the pandemic. These titles were downloaded 350,000 times, from 129 countries. Seven of the top ten downloads were of titles that were over ten years old, demonstrating substantial demand for the backlist. It turns out that when we remove price barriers, there is strong interest in humanities scholarship.

However, there is a challenge in funding Open Access (OA) monographs. The distributional economics of book processing charges (BPCs) are unlikely to scale well.³ Under the BPC model, a payment is made to the publisher to cover the costs of publishing the book as Open Access. Sometimes this will be covered by the author's funding body or institution, but humanities scholars do not generally have recourse, locally, to the types of grant funding necessary to enable BPCs. As such, in the past decade, there have been substantial strides towards collective funding models for OA books. This trend began with Knowledge Unlatched (KU), a communal pooling system for funding BPCs.⁴ Having funded over 2,700 OA book titles, KU is among the most successful OA monograph programs globally to date, by number of funded titles. The basic principle behind KU is

simple yet ingenious: rather than every library buying a copy of a book, every library pitches in a specific “title fee” per book that they wish to be OA. If enough libraries contribute and reach the required revenue threshold, the book will be made Open Access. Hence, KU is a type of crowdfunding with a particular “crowd”: academic libraries.

There have been challenges with KU. As the project has grown, libraries have found it a challenge to support increasing budgetary contributions. It is also clear that KU works well when there is a specific institutional budget for Open Access purchasing. Libraries without OA budgets, though, can struggle to participate in such schemes. Hence, amid a diversity of business models, it is clear that Knowledge Unlatched can only, at present, deliver a partial solution to publishers who wish to benefit from the totality of the library purchasing ecosystem (that is, the totality of library budgets: everything from standard acquisitions to discretionary and ad hoc OA budgets).⁵

A combination of factors has led, then, since around 2020, to the emergence of a range of publisher-specific Open Access monograph funding models. These can roughly be categorized into born-OA presses; small to mid-size university presses employing funding streams to transition them to OA; and funding models transitioning large presses to OA. A summary of these models and their relative strengths is shown in the table below, Appendix A.

The model that we are developing at the COPIM project (funded by Research England and Arcadia, a charitable fund of Dr. Lisbet Rausing and Professor Peter Baldwin) is called “Opening the Future.” It targets the mid-tier of transitioning university presses. “Opening the Future” is a model in which libraries subscribe to a selection of the press’ backlist – to which they gain exclusive access – but the press uses the revenue from this model to fund the frontlist to become Open Access (a ‘backlist’ is the publisher’s list of still-available older books, whereas the newly-published or imminent books are called the ‘frontlist’). The model is extremely cost effective, at just €11 or \$13 per library, per book, if we can hit our membership target of 250 libraries. Fees are banded according to international standards such as those proposed by Jisc and LYRASIS and range from just €350 EUR / \$415 for the smallest libraries up to €1,200/ \$1,430 for the largest. That is,

the most expensive annual fee in the “Opening the Future” model is less than half the cost of an article processing charge (APC) at a large commercial publisher. The presses signed up for the pilot are the Central European University Press and Liverpool University Press. Each has committed packages of between thirty to fifty books that libraries can select for their own catalogs, thus allowing those with conventional purchasing budgets to participate. However, the presses have committed to spend revenue from the program solely on unlocking their frontlist titles as Open Access. In this way, as more libraries subscribe to the backlist, more frontlist titles become openly accessible, under open licenses, in perpetuity. Subscribing institutions gain perpetual access to the backlist titles after three years of annual participation (see Figure 1).

The Opening the Future model in a nutshell



Figure 1: “Opening the Future” Illustrated

The “Opening the Future” model aims to get to a point where participating presses are completely Open Access. However, it achieves that goal incrementally, unlocking frontlist titles as

the funding arrives (see Figure 2). Presses select OA titles before they are put into any sales channel, ensuring that there is no confusion for libraries over which titles are openly accessible and which are for sale (although all open books also remain available for purchase in print).

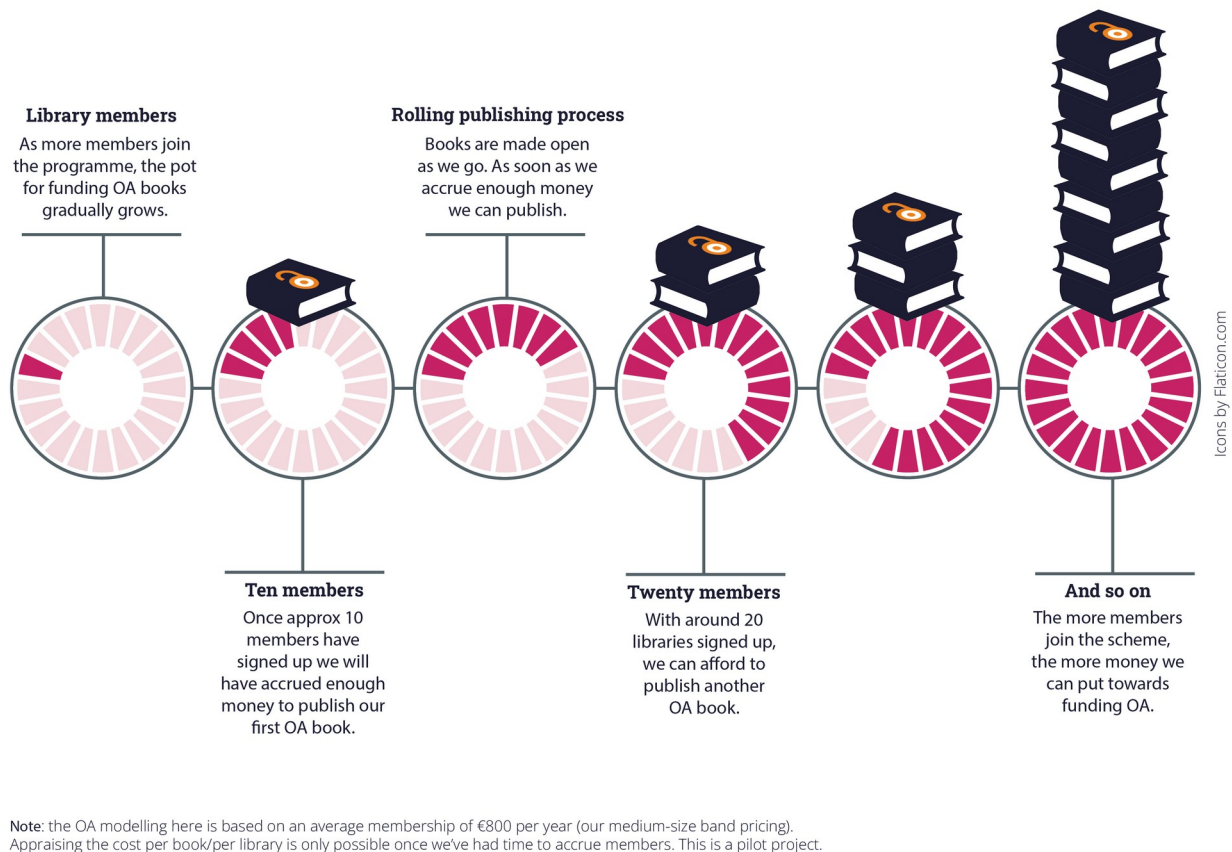


Figure 2: The Dynamic Opening Model of “Opening the Future”

There are some predictable queries from libraries. The most notable of these are whether this hands a blank check to a press. While it is true that this model funds operations at the press level, libraries are, of course, free to leave at any time if they do not value a press’ future publications. Some libraries have also noted that they already own all the backlist titles. In this case, “Opening the Future” represents a sound investment for years to come: this subscription model works out far cheaper than buying all of the titles individually and enables all future books to be OA. There are also questions of cost: is this too expensive? As noted earlier, at less than half an APC for a journal article, this seems a small price to pay to achieve an OA book landscape.

“Opening the Future,” then, is a pilot project designed to represent a low-risk (for presses) and low-cost (for libraries) approach to Open Access for monographs. It provides a model to achieve incremental progress towards OA monographs in a way that avoids author-facing BPCs. Our model is not the only answer; there will be a set of experiments that will continue to blossom at this time. “Opening the Future,” though, represents the first steps by bold pioneer presses to think with greater care around the models that we might use to implement a sustainable and open future for the HSS monograph.

NOTES

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