Community-led Open Publication Infrastructures for Monographs (COPIM)

Beyond BPCs: Reimagining and re-infrastructuring the funding of Open Access books

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If you have heard any of the Open Book Collective team talk about our work, perhaps in a meeting, perhaps in a talk, then it’s likely that at some point, the issue of ‘BPCs’ will have come up. BPCs, or Book Processing Charges, are to books what APCs (Article Processing Charges) are to journals. BPCs are levied — usually to a university or a funder, but also in principle potentially to the author — as a fee for making an academic book available on an Open Access basis. By Open Access I mean work that can be accessed online without barriers, published using an open license — typically, but not necessarily, a Creative Commons licence.

Within the academic publishing industry, BPCs remain the most common way to fund Open Access books. They are used by publishers small and large, and by not-for-profits and commercial publishers. For small/not-for-profit publishers, BPCs are usually used to cover the core production costs associated with book publishing. For large commercial publishers, BPCs can sometimes also be used to offset some of the profit — for example, from books sales or licensing contracts — that is lost when a book is made openly available to all.

**BPCs: Not fit for purpose**

The reason my colleagues and I so often circle back to the issue of BPCs — including in our writing; see for example the recent article by Judith Fathallah — is because in our view BPCs are simply not fit for purpose.

A major issue is that the sheer cost of BPCs makes them an extremely expensive way of funding Open Access books. For large commercial publishers, BPCs of £11,000 and more for a conventional academic book are typical. Given very few academics would themselves have the capacity to easily cover these kinds of costs, BPCs are usually paid by universities or funders — sometimes from a specific fund set aside to cover the costs of Open Access publishing, sometimes from a general unallocated part of a university/department budget, sometimes from the budget of a research grant.

As Open Book Collective colleagues have argued again and again, in line with the aims and mission of the COPIM project, as well as arguments made by other project colleagues, a BPC-based Open Access publishing model is fundamentally unsustainable and unscalable. Any requirement for the higher education sector to pay BPCs on a broadscale basis would require an unparalleled national and global injection of funding.

There are wider issues with BPCs. BPCs reproduce global and local inequalities. Globally, it is far more likely to be academics in wealthier national contexts that have access to funding to cover BPCs. This has the inevitable effect of reinforcing regional differences in book usage patterns, as well as exacerbating the dynamics of exclusion and prejudice, including those connected to the legacies of colonialism, that lead to clear inequalities in how academic work circulates. As Reggie Raju and Jill Claassen write, with reference to the impact on African scholarship of commercial solutions for ‘flipping’ journal content to Open Access, ‘[t]here is a need for a scholarly ecosystem that advances decolonization, democratization of scholarship, de-northernization of the publishing landscape, and demarginalization of African scholarship’. But even locally,
there are significant differences between institutions in what funds are available to cover BPCs; it is also sometimes the case that only academics who have direct access to research grant funding, tending to be in secure academic positions and/or later in their career, are able to cover these costs.

In either case, the result is to shut off a vast body of academics from the benefits that we know flow from book-length scholarship being made available on an Open Access basis.

**A failure of both imagination and infrastructure**

It is also our view that BPCs — often presented by large publishers as the only game in town when it comes to solutions for funding Open Access book publishing — represent a failure: of both imagination and infrastructure.

BPCs are an imaginative failure, because rather than taking the rise of Open Access as a prompt for rethinking the way in which publishing is done and resourced, they lock in business as usual. Even if BPCs are used simply to cover the cost of publication — although as Frances Pinter notes ‘traditional presses may include an element of income substitution for lost sales of print and digital versions’ — the underlying publishing model does not meaningfully change. What does change is the point at which revenue arrives: whereas in a conventional publishing model, revenue is assumed to be largely generated post-publication, with BPCs revenue is generated before the book is even published. If BPCs are also used — at least in part — to offset lost profits, such books now no longer need generate revenue, for example through sales or licensing agreements, at the levels expected for a comparable closed access book.

BPCs also represent an infrastructural failure: put simply, the infrastructures and models needed to generate a transformation in how Open Access book publishing is done, in ways that can help push back against logics of commercialisation and monopolisation, do not yet fully exist. This is despite laudable efforts by individual publishers and initiatives that have undertaken important work to develop shared revenue generation/cost sharing infrastructures — including collaborative publishing platforms (for example, to support African and Francophone scholarship) and involving university coalitions, publisher coalitions, and wider coalitions.

Reimagining Open Access may therefore, as I have argued elsewhere, require that much more ‘infrastructuring’ work be done, so that openly available academic books become not the exception but the norm. As a sociologist working in the field of science and technology studies, I have a long-standing interest in infrastructures as ‘relational’ things. Over 20 years ago now, Susan Leigh Star explored the relational composition of infrastructures in her classic article ‘The ethnography of infrastructure’ (sadly still behind a paywall — but my COPIM colleague Martin Eve has uploaded some helpful notes). She argued that when analyzing — and also, I would argue when building — (digital) infrastructures, it is crucial that we carefully consider ‘what values and ethical principles […] we inscribe in the inner depths of the built information environment’.
From this kind of perspective, infrastructures — including the infrastructures of publishing and revenue distribution — need to be understood as situated interventions that are, in a very direct way, involved in putting a wide range of new relations into play, including value systems and ethical relationships. How, then, might we take this in account when putting together a new digital infrastructure to support Open Access book publishing?

The Open Book Collective: Doing the funding of Open Access book publishing differently

The challenge we took on in creating — in infrastructuring — what would eventually become the Open Book Collective, was how to respond to the failures of both infrastructure and imagination that have characterized the Open Access book publishing landscape. And here it is worth being absolutely clear: building a new revenue model and a new infrastructure — in our case a digital infrastructure — is neither a straightforward task nor a task that should be understood as anything less than a political intervention.

Susan Leigh Star’s work makes this clear, as does the extensive range of more recent work by social scientists that demonstrates the existence of a deep politics to digital platforms, which is perhaps easiest to understand when seeing how, for example, search algorithms amplify prejudice — for example in intersections between racism and gender based discrimination — but can affect many parts of platform design. The specific choices made not just about algorithms but revenue model, platform design, user flow, and many other dimensions besides, have the potential to shape the contours of public life in ways that cannot ever be fully anticipated.

Our work on the model underpinning the Open Book Collective was therefore deliberate and careful, including dialogue with publishers and libraries, for example in workshops in the UK and the USA, research around existing revenue models, research on existing collaborative models, examining models for governing community-led organisations, presentations of our work for feedback in numerous settings and, less visibly, extensive discussion within part of the COPIM team working on the ‘revenue models’ part of the project (what we called ‘Work Package 2’ of the COPIM project).

Some of these discussions were difficult. When what is at stake is what form a small but important part of the future of Open Access publishing will take, and when it comes to making potentially consequential decisions about how revenue flows, to whom, and via what means, it is unsurprising that what might from the outside appear to be details can become subject to intense scrutiny. In many ways, this is as it should be.

Given the Open Book Collective’s revenue model took so much of energy to compose, I wanted — potentially for the benefit of future initiatives looking to do something similar — to pull out some of the decisions we made and the thinking behind them. I would also like to highlight that this was a truly collaborative effort, with Eileen Joy — my co-lead on the COPIM revenue models work package — Rupert Gatti and I being particularly deeply involved, with crucial support and insight from Izabella Penier, and input at key points from the wider COPIM team, the advisory board, and external legal and financial advisors.
The structure of the revenue model

The Open Book Collective’s online presence — its ‘platform’ — serves many functions, including providing information about our aims, governance, model and values, as well resources about Open Access. However, a key part of the platform is the area where publishers and publishing ‘service providers’, as we call them (the organisations that provide the crucial infrastructures for Open Access book publishing) make available ‘Offers’ that universities and other organisations can potentially subscribe to.

These Offers use the membership programme funding model which has been used successfully by both service providers (OAPEN/Director of Open Access Books) and publishers (for example Open Book Publishers and punctum books) to generate long term funding from supporters. Supporters pay less for access (e.g. to a platform or to scholarly content) and more to support the organization for an agreed period (often 1 to 3 years, with the possibility of renewal thereafter). The supporter will usually receive some benefits in return for the support (e.g. custom reports, updates, additional content).

However, in many cases a supporter’s decision-making will take into account a much broader range of criteria. In a recent article that takes issue with models that assume that libraries are market actors, focused on maximising scarce resources in their subscription selections, Eileen Joy and her punctum books Co-director Vincent van Gerven Oei point out that ‘many libraries have well-developed, richly complex criteria for evaluating and funding OA initiatives’. Benefits directly associated with a particular offer are routinely considered alongside wider factors. As they observe, this can include the fit between a particular publisher’s areas of subject focus and that of the university’s faculty, or how a publisher addresses issues of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) in its work, or how a publisher offers new publication routes for researchers. Other factors might include a publisher’s approach to peer review, its archiving and preservation practices, how it tracks usage, the publisher or service provider’s past track record (e.g. for delivering vital Open Access services, the quality of its books), and its approach to its future commitments. It is not that all of these factors will be considered by every library — but at some point they may all be considered by at least one.

Because with this model supporters contribute directly to an organization rather than to open up specific, demarcated content, the Open Book Collective’s model provides a marked contrast to Wiley’s Knowledge Unlatched, in which libraries provide pledges that cumulatively enable different book packages becoming ‘unlatched’ — i.e. published Open Access. A key advantage of the membership model that the Open Book Collective builds on and attempts to scale, is that publishers retain full editorial control over which content to publish Open Access.

In the Open Book Collective model, we give publisher/service provider members substantial — but not total — control over how their individual Offers are priced. Each initiative proposes a ‘tiered’ costing Offer to us (tiered pricing involves varying subscription prices by university’s size and/or national context), which we assess to determine whether it is fair and reasonable. If so, and our Membership Committee agrees that the
initiative meets our broader membership criteria, then it is eligible to become a member of the Open Book Collective, with its Offer potentially hosted on our platform.

We offer diverse routes for supporters to subscribe to our Offers. We particularly encourage support for what we call ‘Packages’. Packages are, in effect, groupings of Offers made available by individual publisher/service provider members of the Open Book Collective. The total cost for subscribing to a Package is the sum total of all the Offers included within it.

At the time of writing, we have one Package comprising members of the ScholarLed consortium (a group of academic-led Diamond Open Access publishers), one Package which includes our publishing service provider members (currently OAPEN/DOAB and Thoth), and the ‘Open Book Collective’ Package. The last of these, and the largest of the three current Packages, groups together the Offers of all the members of the Open Book Collective. We encourage support for Packages in how we have designed our user flow, with our main ‘Support OA Initiatives’ page prioritizing packages over individual initiatives. However, users can also choose individual initiatives to subscribe to, via a second tab.

The model is therefore designed to encourage support for collectives while making members responsible for the pricing of their Offers, with oversight from the Open Book Collective. The model also allows the Open Book Collective to grow. As each new member is added to the collective, their Offer is both added to relevant Packages and available to be subscribed to individually. This does mean that the total cost of supporting the Open Book Collective will grow over time. But supporters retain the option to subscribe to a subset of individual Offers if they wish.

**Open Book Collective fees**

We also worked long and hard on our fee structure. It was decided early on that the Open Book Collective would be a not-for-profit (in the end, we decided to become a charity — and are currently in the process of applying to the Charity Commission to be registered as such; this and our governance structure is designed to prevent us being purchased by a commercial actor in future). But we obviously have operating costs — mostly outreach and administration, as I will come back to later.

In our final model, operating costs are broadly shared equally between our supporters — mostly universities, via their libraries — and our publisher/service provider members. We charge both supporters and publishers/service providers a ‘processing fee’ for each subscription we receive.

For supporters, a 5% charge is added onto the cost of supporting an offer. The way supporter fees work is best explained with an example: of a large ‘Tier 1’ UK university subscribing to the Offer we host from Open Book Publishers, one of our academic-led Diamond Open Access publisher members (not to be confused with the Open Book Collective!). For a university of this type — in the UK categorised according to the Jisc banding...
system — the annual subscription fee is £700. We then add our Supporter Processing Fee, bringing the total amount invoiced, per year, to £735.

![OpenBook Publishers](image)

**Fig. 1: Example fees for supporters: Costs for supporting one of our publishers for a Tier 1 UK University**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Fee</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subscription Fee for Tier 1 institution</td>
<td>£700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Jisc bands 1-4), for 12 months</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporter Processing Fee @ 5%</td>
<td>£35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total invoiced</strong></td>
<td><strong>£735</strong></td>
</tr>
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The cost for supporting the Open Book Collective as a whole — the sum total of each initiative’s Offer, in other words — currently stands at just over £10,000 for a Tier 1 university in the UK, and a comparable amount in other currencies. This supports nine different initiatives — seven publishers and two service providers — for less than the cost of a BPC for a single book for many commercial BPCs.

However, there is considerable variation in the individual prices charged by our publisher/service provider members. Some charge more for their Offers than Open Book Publishers; some charge less. Such variation is partly connected to the organisation’s size and, in the case of publishers, output — i.e. how many books are typically published per year. But pricing can be related to other factors. It can be affected by what other sources of revenue an initiative receives; some organisations, for example, receive direct or in-kind support from universities. National norms can also affect pricing: what is considered expensive and what is not, for example.

For publishing/service provider members, processing fees are retained from subscription income. With the exception of the first year in which an initiative receives support via the Open Book Collective, this fee is again 5%. In the first year of support, we charge a slightly higher fee of 7.5%. This reflects the higher costs involved in working with a supporter to get them enrolled for the first time.

There is a second fee we ask our members to pay out of their subscription income. As a charity, the Open Book Collective is keen to support not just our members but also the wider Open Access book publishing ecosystem. So we decided to create a grant giving fund — what we call the ‘Collective Development Fund’ — which
organisations working within the Open Access book publishing space, including those that are not members of the Open Book Collective, can apply if they wish to build their Open Access publishing capacity (e.g. optimise their metadata management, work on their archiving and preservation practices, improve their website). We expect this fund to officially launch in 2024. It is funded in part by new grant funding we have received, which I will come back to. It is replenished by Collective Development Fund fees. These are again retained from publisher/service provider subscription income at a rate of 5%.

To continue with the previous example, this means that if a UK University supports Open Book Publishers at the Tier 1 Offer rate of £700, then from year 2 onwards we retain a £35 Processing Fee (this would be £53 in year 1) plus a £35 contribution towards the Collective Development Fund. With this fee structure, we again are embedding the principle of collectivization in our revenue model, with a portion of the revenue received by the Open Book Collective benefitting the wider ecosystem. At the same time we pass on the vast majority of subscription revenue received — 90% from Year 2 onwards; in the example £630 — to our publisher and service provider members.

Pragmatic considerations also inform our model: it has been designed so that the Open Book Collective can be fully financially self-sustaining once our publisher/service provider members receive annual support from approximately 150 to 200 libraries — a figure comparable to what has been achieved by similar initiatives. In the meantime, we receive direct financial support from Arcadia and the Research England Development Fund.
via the new Open Book Futures project, which is the successor to COPIM. This includes a direct contribution to the Collective Development Fund, but also support for staffing, website development, and other costs.

Also, the reason we separate out our fees as we do — distinguishing subscription income from fees — is because of tax. If we bundled these revenue streams together, there is a risk that the Open Book Collective might become liable for tax on the total income passing through our accounts, and not just on the fee income that we retain. Being taxed on all the revenue we receive would make our model unviable.

Our model is not perfect. As supporters can choose one initiative over another, it is possible that we may, in time, see inequalities emerge. Will, for example, publishers whose books are in English receive more funding than publishers working in non-Anglophone contexts? Will publishers receive more than service providers? Will large initiatives receive more subscriptions than small initiatives? If so, then we will look to respond — perhaps even in how we charge our fees. These are questions to return to once we have more information on where Open Book Collective revenue flows and how.

Collective infrastructuring as a response to BPCs

The Open Book Collective’s revenue model is radically different from a BPC-based funding model. Rather than expecting individual institutions, or even authors, to pay for the costs of Open Access book publishing, including potentially paying to feed into the considerable profit margins of some large publishers, we distribute the costs of Open Access publishing across a large number of supporters.

For libraries, the Open Book Collective makes it possible to support numerous initiatives, providing both books and infrastructure services of the highest quality, on an annual basis, often for less than the cost of a single BPC. This expenditure is predictable, so can be built into budget lines. And it has huge impact, supporting the development of not just individual Open Access books, but organisations as a whole, enabling them to pay staff fairly and to build publishing models and infrastructures that at least match, and can exceed, the standards of large commercial publishers. There are opportunities for supporters to become involved the governance of the Open Book Collective, to play a role in steering our direction.

The Open Book Collective also democratises the membership programme funding model. By working with us, some smaller publishers and service providers are able to to run a membership programme — and hence to receive income from libraries — for the very first time. This is because our processing fees cover the administrative and outreach costs required to make this kind of revenue model work.

This is what infrastructuring — collective infrastructuring — can look like: creating novel conditions of possibility, while also shifting some of the value relations that connect publishers, to service providers, to authors, to libraries. Within the Open Book Collective, we have no wish to remain a disinterested market intermediary, simply shuttling funds from one part of the academic system to another. We are keen to play a small but active part in reimagining and re-infrastructuring the funding of Open Access books. Much more of
this kind of work is urgently needed, to secure a fairer, more sustainable future for Open Access book publishing.

**Footnotes**

0. Raju, R. and Claassen, J. (2022) ‘Open access: From hope to betrayal | Raju | College & Research Libraries News’. Available at: [https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.83.4.161](https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.83.4.161).


0. Including experiments with new models for funding Open Access books created by both smaller (e.g. Language Science Press, Open Book Publishers, punctum books) and larger (e.g. MIT Press, Michigan Press) publishers.


0. We did consider whether or not to offer Packages at a discount, however in the end decided against it, to avoid watering down the revenue that our members receive.

0. For example, in 2022 Elsevier made **£1.1 billion in profit**, based on **£2.9 billion in revenue** — a 38% profit margin.