Open Access journals are published under a variety of business models. Costs need to be covered and there are various ways of doing this. Of course, the lower the cost base, the easier it is to develop a way of doing business that is sustainable. Smaller publishers and society publishers that do not have quite such a strong demand to create shareholder value find it is easier to switch to an Open Access model than large commercial publishers that need not only to reliably cover their operating costs but to produce a sizeable bottom-line figure.

The main types of business model that allow a publisher to deliver Open Access content online are as follows. There are also examples of Open Access journal publishing that use combinations of these or variations on them.

**Community publishing**

This model is common for journals in small, niche areas of research, and especially (but not exclusively) in the arts and humanities. Journals are produced entirely within the academy and published online for free, and sometimes in print for a small subscription charge to cover the printing and distribution costs. The costs are kept at the lowest possible level by the use of volunteer labour for peer review, editing and production. The process can be streamlined by the use of dedicated journal production systems that organise workflow and professionalise the outputs. The most widely-used of these is the open source Open Journal Systems software.

This form of publishing model is also a variant of the institutional subsidy model (below), since in almost all cases institutional facilities are used in the publishing process, even if this is restricted to occasional printing, copying and telephone calls!

**Advertising or sponsorship supported journals**

The most likely area for attracting advertising is medicine and it is possible to find pharmaceutical companies that will sponsor a special issue of a journal or place regular advertising in a title. As well, the biggest names in academic journals outside medicine, *Science* and *Nature*, both attract large amounts of advertising from employers, conference organisers, other publishers and so on.
These are all exceptions, though. The vast majority of journals cannot hope to attract enough advertising to support their operations without other revenue: nonetheless, if a journal reaches the right audience and has established the right niche, advertising sales can help to support Open Access. Advertising can be a partial solution, in other words.

An example of a prestigious journal that makes its research content Open Access online helped by an advertising revenue stream is the *British Medical Journal* (see announcement [here](#)). This title earns income from selling advertising (it is a prime vehicle for job advertisements in the UK medical arena) and subscriptions to libraries and the revenue enables it to offer its research content free online without any author or reader charges.

**Institutional subsidy**

Institutions formally subsidise journal publishing wherever they are supporting a university press or a publishing operation by the library. Although the sustainability of this model may seem unclear, it is likely to grow in importance as shifts occur in the economic environment around scholarly communication and as scholars increasingly prefer to take a greater control over the communication process. The period where commercial concerns dominated scholarly publishing has been a very short one in the history of academic endeavour: the academy handled its own communications system for centuries and may be at the point of re-entering the arena as a major force. If there is interest at institutional level in developing a publishing strategy, the players that need to be involved are the library, the press (if there is one) and the institutional repository.

**Hard copy sales**

As described above, the *British Medical Journal* supports its Open Access publishing model partly by sales of the print version. Many other Open Access journals are published using this model, and thus have no need to levy an article-processing charge (APC) at the front end of the publishing process. MedKnow, an Indian medical publisher, publishes all its journals on this basis. All the contents are freely accessible online, and libraries around the world subscribe to the hard copy version. See the [case study](#) for further details on this publisher, whose sales have increased as a result of opening access to the online version. It is not only medical publications that can make this economic model work, though. Journals across all disciplines find that it is a viable model.

**Article-processing charges**

It is commonly held that Open Access journals all levy a charge at the front end of the publishing process which has to be paid by authors, their institutions or research funders. this is
not true. A study by Kaufman and Wills showed that 53% of Open Access journals have no article-processing charges. A further study, this time by Hooker, found that 67% of fully Open Access journals on the DOAJ charge no fees and Morrison found that less than 10% of Open Access journals in psychology charge a fee. Moreover, Suber and Sutton showed that 83% of Open Access journals published by learned society publishers make no charge for their Open Access journals, either.

Many journals do levy an APC, however. It is a sustainable model where the community served by the journal has funds to use for this purpose. The funds almost always come from an author's research funder or institution. Some research funders have explicitly committed to providing funds specifically for the payment of APCs. In other cases, funders have said that research grants money may be allocated to publishing costs at the grant-holder's discretion. This is something that has always happened anyway in disciplines where page charges or colour charges levied by publishers are common and explains why there is little resistance from the author community in these disciplines to paying at the 'front end' of the publishing cycle. See Funder policies on Open Access publishing for more on this. BioMed Central, a large Open Access publisher, maintains a list of foundations that support Open Access publishing in this way.

Another source of funds for the payment of individual APCs is the author's institution. This is not common, but the number of institutions experimenting with establishing a pot of money to pay for APCs is growing. These include the University of Nottingham, Bielefeld University, Tilburg University, University of Madison-Wisconsin, Technical University of Delft, Wageningen University & Research Centre, University of California at Berkeley, the University of Calgary. A sign of the times, though, is that the University of Amsterdam's fund has been discontinued because of the unpredicatable and precarious economic situation. Each institution has its own policy on how authors may access this fund. None of these trials has been in operation for more than a year or so and the long term outcomes are as yet unclear.
Institutional membership schemes

Some Open Access publishers have also introduced an institutional membership scheme. Whilst this may not be a suitable business model for very small publishers, it is possible to do this if the publishing operation is sizeable enough. Details vary from publisher to publisher. Two examples are: BioMed Central, which has a scheme with various tiers of payment, allowing institutions to pay a lump sum annually in advance for articles that their authors will publish in BioMed Central journals that year; and the Hindawi Publishing Corporation, which has a flat-rate scheme of annual payments.

Collaborative purchasing models

There is one example of such a model in the planning at the moment, the SCOAP3 (Sponsoring Consortium for Open Access Publishing in Particle Physics) venture in high energy physics. The SCOAP3 consortium is a collection of institutions, research laboratories and scholarly societies which, together with national research funders, are to pay fees to the publishers of journals in high energy physics in return for making the entire contents of those journals Open Access. The project is currently still gathering sponsors. Its scalability is low, though it may work in high energy physics because this is a discrete field served by only a small number of journals (fewer than ten). Thus it is possible to envisage this sort of solution for such a community.

Also see:

Converting to Open Access

Scholarly societies and Open Access publishing

University presses and Open Access publishing

Funder policies on Open Access publishing
Open Access monographs

References and resources


Caroline Sutton and David Solomon have set up a resource featuring materials and advice from their first workshop on Open Access Publishing held in Vancouver in 2009. They will be offering further workshops and hope to make it an ongoing series. Their website giving details is here.