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The Sustainability of Open Access Business Models in eJournals

The open access (OA) movement has fundamentally reshaped how knowledge is shared. For academic publishers and journal hosting platforms, OA has brought powerful benefits: greater reach, global accessibility, and alignment with ethical principles of equity and transparency. But it also raises a tough question:
Can open access business models sustain high-quality, ethical, and scalable publishing over the long term?

Let’s explore the four most widely used OA business models and assess their long-term viability across key dimensions: equity, scalability, and sustainability.



1. Article Processing Charges (APCs)

The APC model is currently the most prevalent approach in open access publishing. In this system, authors—or their funding bodies—pay a fee to cover the costs of publication, enabling the article to be freely accessible to all.

Pros:

- Highly scalable for high-volume journals and large publishers
- Facilitates immediate open access without the need for complex institutional negotiations

Cons:

- Places the financial burden directly on authors, which can be a barrier
- Risks excluding underfunded researchers, particularly those in the Global South
- Has been associated with the rise of predatory journals that exploit the APC model for profit

Reality Check:

In practice, an APC of around $2,500 may be manageable for well-funded laboratories in the US or Europe. However, for many researchers in Africa, Asia, or Latin America, this fee can be prohibitively high. Even institutions with limited budgets often find it challenging to support APC-heavy publishing models.

Although some publishers offer fee waivers or discounts, the process is often inconsistent and difficult to navigate. For the APC model to be truly effective and equitable, it must be supported by transparent policies, comprehensive inclusion initiatives, and reliable waiver programs.

Diamond Open Access

Diamond OA is the most equitable model on paper: no fees for authors and no paywalls for readers. Instead, funding often comes from universities, libraries, or consortia.

Pros:

- Maximizes equity and inclusivity
- Ideal for community-led or regional journals
- Popular in Latin America and the humanities

Cons:

- Funding is often uncertain or piecemeal
- Limited scalability without long-term support structures

Reality Check:

In Latin America, approximately 95% of OA journals operate under a Diamond model, supported by regional infrastructure platforms like SciELO and Redalyc. This approach, which provides free access to readers and does not charge authors, is celebrated as a pinnacle of knowledge equity—aligned with UNESCO’s vision of open and inclusive access.

However, maintaining these journals without a predictable revenue stream remains a significant challenge. Many rely on intermittent grants, sporadic funding, or in-kind institutional support, which creates a fragile foundation for long-term sustainability.

For Diamond OA to thrive sustainably, it requires a robust and predictable funding infrastructure. Additionally, integrating with efficient journal management systems that streamline operations and automate core workflows can reduce administrative burdens, enabling these journals to focus on their scholarly mission and ensuring their longevity.

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Institutional Funding Models: Stable but Selective

In this model, universities or research institutions fund journal operations directly often as part of a mission to advance open research.

Pros:

- Reliable backing for journals aligned with institutional goals
- Reduces financial barriers for authors
- Can support innovation in scholarly publishing platforms

Cons:

- Tends to favor journals with institutional affiliation
- May limit funding to select disciplines or content types

Reality check:

Initiatives like MIT Press's Direct to Open show how institutional subsidies can scale. But these models work best for institutions with strong infrastructure and long-term financial commitment.

Projects like MIT Press's Direct to Open and the University of California's eScholarship platform show how institutions can lead sustainable OA publishing. But for this to scale globally, partnerships, shared infrastructure, and academic publishing solutions are essential.

This model works best when journals can integrate with a digital publishing platform that streamlines content production, hosting, and indexing.

Transformative Agreements: Transitional or Long-Term Solution?

Transformative agreements shift payment structures from subscription-based access to open access publishing usually negotiated between libraries and major publishers.

Pros:

- Supports transition to OA for large publishers
- Maintains publishing revenue while expanding open access

Cons:

- Often expensive and skewed toward well-funded institutions
- May reinforce publisher monopolies and limit smaller journal inclusion

Reality check:

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Germany’s DEAL agreement with Springer Nature publishes 13,000 articles annually at a cost of over €30 million/year. Effective for large-scale operations but less accessible for smaller institutions or publishers without negotiating power.

These agreements can accelerate change but only for those with leverage and budgets to match.

Long term, this model raises questions about consolidation and control in scholarly communication. A more balanced approach might pair large deals with support for multi-journal management systems and independent platforms that offer more flexibility.

Blended Approaches

No single model works for every journal, discipline, or region. Many academic publishers are experimenting with hybrid approaches, combining:

- Institutional backing with APC waivers
- Diamond OA foundations supplemented by grants
- Transformative deals with library consortia for scale

The future lies in modular, customizable solutions like our scalable journal management system, which supports multiple funding and publishing workflows within a single, integrated platform.

Whether you're launching a new OA journal or managing a portfolio of titles, choosing the right model should align with your mission, audience, and infrastructure.

What Should Publishers Consider?

When choosing or refining a business model, journal teams should ask themselves:

- Who is our core audience, and what are their funding realities?
- Does our current model promote equity and ensure broad accessibility?
- How stable is our funding outlook over the next 5 to 10 years?
- Are we using a journal hosting platform that can scale and adapt as we grow?
- Have we transparently communicated our business model to authors and stakeholders?

If these questions lead to more uncertainties than confidence, it may be time to seek guidance from a publishing partner that provides both strategic insights and reliable technology solutions.

At CloudPublish, we assist academic publishers in deploying tailored journal management systems that harmonize editorial control with sustainable financial planning. Whether you're transitioning from subscription-based models or launching a new open access journal, our flexible hosting software is designed to support your long-term growth and success.

No One Model Fits All

Open access is more than just a policy—it’s a movement rooted in ethics, equity, and innovation. However, without financial sustainability, even the most well-meaning journals risk faltering.

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At CloudPublish, we envision a flexible, modular future where publishers can tailor and combine different models to suit their unique missions. This is supported by robust electronic journal management systems that streamline operations, reduce overhead, and amplify impact.

Sustainability isn't a one-size-fits-all solution. It's contextual, mission-driven, and dependent on reliable infrastructure. Let's work together to build open access systems that embrace this complexity—and rise to meet it.

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