



# Insights into the Economy of Open Scholarship: A look into the Open Library of Humanities with Martin Paul Eve, Co-founder



# About Open Library of Humanities

OLH is a UK charity, with a board of trustees who are responsible for governance. Income generated cannot be used for any purpose other than OLH's charitable goals. OLH is funded via a 'library partnership subsidy model', with over 200 libraries paying an annual sum in order for OLH to publish 24 open access journals that don't require authors to pay article processing charges (APCs), including a mega journal called 'Open Library of Humanities'. Occasionally, OLH also pursues grants to fund tangential activities such as marketing and innovation research.

[openlibhums.org](https://openlibhums.org)

# OLH: Business model

## Key activities

- ▶ Open access publisher for humanities and social sciences (HSS)



## Organisation type

- ▶ Charity
- ▶ Staff: 6 FTE  
'(Full-time equivalent)'



## Key partners

- ▶ Funding agencies
- ▶ Libraries
- ▶ University presses
- ▶ Infrastructure: Ubiquity Press



## Revenue streams

- ▶ Annual membership fees paid by libraries (library consortium model)
- ▶ Grant funding



## IP/Copyright

- ▶ Full licence suite for articles published
- ▶ Code base of the in-house platform Janeway: open source



## Customers/users

- ▶ Researchers
- ▶ Libraries



# Interview with Martin Paul Eve

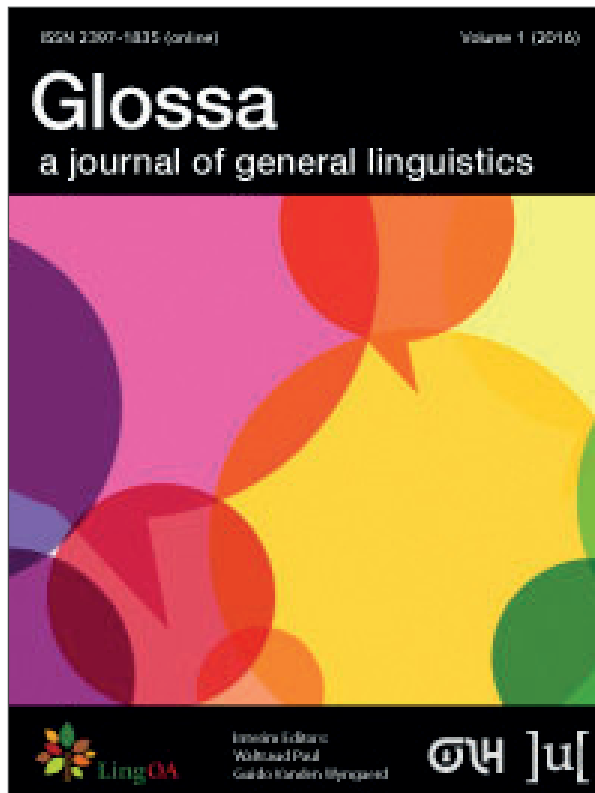
To address the aversion to author fees, considered by most humanities scholars as an unworkable model, OLH developed a new model for open access publishing: the library partnership subsidy model.

“When Caroline Edwards and I established OLH (in 2013) there was a discussion going on in humanities about the applicability of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) open access paradigms to humanities and social sciences (HSS). The main, successful model for open access publishing model was that of **PLOS** ([plos.org](https://plos.org)); transdisciplinary, author fee-based mega journals seemed the way forward. However, many HSS scholars did not feel that this model was suitable for them and perceived open access as yet another unattainable funder requirement,” says **Martin Paul Eve**.

“Our business model is based on the ‘library partnership subsidy’ model. Our income comes from small annual fees paid by libraries, which makes it look from the outside a bit like the traditional subscription model. Where we are different from the traditional economic models, under which I count the APC or author fee-based open access publishing model as well, is that libraries pay so that we can exist but they don’t necessarily pay for their own benefit.

“All subscriptions are pooled, and subscribing to OLH does not mean that ‘your’ authors can publish or read your publications – because those aspects are already open for everyone. We don’t check if authors are affiliated with institutions that pay a fee to us. We want to say to libraries: ‘you are paying us to be able to exist, and we will publish anyone who passes our peer review process’.

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*GLOSSA, one of the most well known journals hosted by OLH*

“Author fees are not the only issue that needs to be addressed in HSS open access publishing,” says Eve, “but we feared that in coming up with even more innovations, we would lose the community entirely. So, although we do run one mega journal, we decided to remain rather conventional on other fronts, such as using a double blind peer review system.”

Eve sees some real advantages in comparison with author fee-based models: “Author fee-based open access publishers will always have to make sure they reach a certain number of publications to remain sustainable – which in some cases might have an influence on quality control processes.

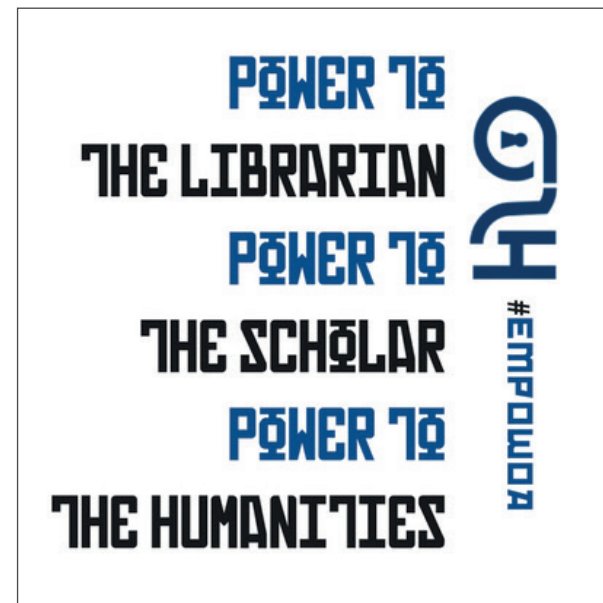
“In our model, we incur a small cost when we publish an article, so we have to ensure good quality control. We keep the fees deliberately small so that individual libraries can circumvent the chain of command related to acquisitions and make the decision to join OLH themselves.”

Currently around 220 libraries are paying an annual fee, which allows OLH to break even. The average production cost per article is around 600 EUR. That includes not only OLH services, but also a buffer to fix mistakes. Eve: “The absolute raw cost per article is probably only around 400 EUR, but overhead costs can increase this quickly, so 600-650 EUR is a safer guess. As we receive the money in advance, via the subscription system, there’s no conflict of interest between our revenue stream and the editorial process. We believe this has a positive effect on academics’ perceptions of our initiatives.”

The OLH business model is dependent on available library funding, supplied with occasional grant funding. Eve: “We currently have a library sign up once every two weeks and a cancellation once every four weeks, so we are growing but at a very moderate pace. One of our current focuses is therefore marketing and outreach, to increase this rate of growth. We have sufficient reserves to keep us in operation for one year. One challenge is to keep institutions renewing their memberships even if we are no longer the new exciting thing. Especially in economic hard times libraries have to make the choice every year between us and Elsevier, because even if they don’t subscribe, they know they’ll keep having access to our content in any case. This is our very own prisoners’ dilemma.”

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As library budgets worldwide are decreasing, Eve is worried about OLH’s scalability: “We work with such small margins to keep it cheap, but that gives us very little breathing space. Scaling is a challenge. We receive many more applications to publish journals than we can fund. Even if we increase our fees only marginally in absolute terms, they are so small that we would quickly arrive at a 20% increase, and that worries libraries. They need to give us licence to expand. Libraries vote for journals to come in, but then don’t renew their subscription. They don’t understand that their vote is part of our financial planning. Running a large-scale governance organisation is something that we were a bit too optimistic about. I really underestimated the time and effort these outreach and marketing activities take.



*#empowoa: recent marketing campaign by OLH*

“If I had known this, I would have tripled efforts in that department from the start. We need to increase our membership rate substantially in order to remain sustainable, but this requires a lot of manpower. It’s not a matter of ‘build it and they will come’ – in most cases, we need to convince libraries in person to sign on and to stay on board. That’s a lot of effort.”

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Another issue OLH faces is that usage and reader statistics, a factor of interest for libraries when renewing their subscriptions, remain very difficult to gather for open access publications. Eve: “We quite often get requests from big universities for usage statistics when they have to decide to renew their membership, which means we have to spend a long time filling out forms and providing detailed information.

“A lot of staff time is spent on these calculations, which means our operations become more expensive. Also, if you know that the largest fees are only around 2,000 USD, this means a lot of work for us for very little revenue. If everybody requested these detailed statistics, we would have to double our prices. I think libraries often don’t understand the bureaucratic burden for small organisations like ours.”

OLH is a small organisation, with a staff of around six FTE, officially affiliated with **Birkbeck University ([bbk.ac.uk](http://bbk.ac.uk))**, where OLH is based. The university deals with technological support, marketing and scholarly communications. Eve: “We are very hands-on and, from the start, Caroline Edwards and I had the best idea of what we were supposed to be doing, including coding the technological infrastructure. The plan for the future, however, is to leave the day-to-day workings to dedicated staff and for us to supervise the academic aspects.”

For its infrastructure, OLH collaborates with **Ubiquity Press ([ubiquitypress.com](http://ubiquitypress.com))**: “We started out with them, not only because they offered a good price and were willing to defer author fees during the start-up phase, but also they were very keen to support us.

“We realised we needed a platform to show if we wanted to raise subscriptions, but we did not want to reinvent the wheel by developing it in-house. We are aiming to diversify though, because we do not want to rely entirely on a single partner for our infrastructure. That’s why we decided to build an in-house platform after all, called **Janeway ([openlibhums.org/site/janeway](http://openlibhums.org/site/janeway))**. A part of our infrastructure is also hosted at the university presses we work with. We pay them to host some journals we make in partnership with them,” says Eve.

“But these presses rely on our support – which is again dependent on our growth – and in any case it remains cheaper for us to publish in-house than to outsource it to a university press. Ideally, we’d find one or more university presses and convince them to implement our model. Most of them are struggling in any case, why not go open access according to our library consortium model and create a big ruckus? For that, I’d have to find the right person, somebody who is not only convinced of the model but also has the institutional power to do it.”

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When it comes to licensing, OLH’s preference is **Creative Commons ([creativecommons.org](https://creativecommons.org))** Attribution (CC BY) by default, but because there is so much debate about the use of this licence in HSS they do allow more restrictive licences. There

is also a practical reason: because OLH’s portfolio contains a lot of third party content for which reuse rights are not clear at all (a common problem when publishing about art history, for example), the publisher tends to be on the cautious side to avoid lawsuits.

“I am not a licensing purist, I’m a pragmatist,” says Eve. “I prefer ‘free access’ over no access at all. In humanities, a lot of images are being reused and many galleries, libraries, archives and museums (GLAMs) have very unclear licensing policies themselves, so we need to be careful – there’s always the possibility of a lawsuit if we get anything wrong and we cannot afford that. So anything we can get on top of free access is a bonus; if there are restrictions such as only allowing non-commercial use this is not a breaking point for us.”

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“You have to take into account that very few authors understand what they are signing up for when agreeing to an open licence. Some authors even write to me to get my permission to reprint their own, CC BY-licensed works. There is a huge cultural and ethical challenge caused by getting authors to sign something they don’t understand, and publishers should have an obligation to help them understand these terms.”



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OLH is outspokenly not-for-profit. Eve: “Scholarly communications is not a market, and it doesn’t work according to traditional economic rules. You can’t say: ‘I’ll buy this article or that book instead of the one you really wanted’. So why and where do we think that price competition is going to emerge, let alone have a beneficial effect? This is why I’m against commercial actors working in

scholarly publishing, especially the ‘big four’ who are essentially vultures, generating huge profit margins using public funds while at the same time academic libraries and university presses suffer and see their funds being decreased all the time.”

“I think only non-profit actors should be allowed to operate in the field of scholarly publishing. At the same time, some non-commercial actors act as badly as the for-profit ones so that’s no guarantee, but at least it would be a step forward. These giant entities do not spur innovation, as they claim, rather they create monopolies and suck the life out of the small players by buying them up. By taking such a big slice of budgets they inhibit innovation. We have to think about the money you save when cancelling subscriptions, and invest the saved money into innovative infrastructure processes. What’s the role of the library in the 21st century if it is not facilitating open scholarship? Part of the role of the library has to be to enable new and innovative approaches.”

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This outspoken stance doesn't mean that Eve is not interested in the economic aspects of open scholarship: "In the end, whether you call it revenue streams or something else, it's still an essential part of running your organisation even if you are a charity. I don't see why publishing, which is a proper job, should be voluntary or underpaid work. Moreover, if you only work with volunteers, it's not good for diversity because only certain types of people can afford to work without getting paid."

Pioneering the collective library subsidy model, OLH has built a highly respected not-for-profit with an innovative business model. "I would really like to see more experiments with business models outside of the dominant APC model. It's not good practice to hardwire one type of business model into funding requirements. If you invest in different models you can actually generate some market pressure and reduce the risk of monopolisation."

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"We've shown that you can think differently about economics in university environments," concludes Eve. "We hope that we can serve as an inspiration for other organisations to adopt our business model and get a range of publishers doing this, so that we can spread the risk and libraries come to accept that this is a commonplace system. I'd like it if OLH wasn't the only one working this way any more. We need to expand our model and 'normalise' what we are doing, so that libraries will better understand and we don't have to explain it from scratch every time."

### References and relevant links

- ▶ OLH: [openlibhums.org](https://openlibhums.org)
- ▶ PLOS: [plos.org](https://plos.org)
- ▶ Birkbeck, University of London: [bbk.ac.uk](https://bbk.ac.uk)
- ▶ Ubiquity Press: [ubiquitypress.com](https://ubiquitypress.com)
- ▶ Creative Commons licence suite: [creativecommons.org](https://creativecommons.org)
- ▶ Janeway: [openlibhums.org/site/janeway](https://openlibhums.org/site/janeway)

# About Martin Paul Eve

## Co-founder



Martin Paul Eve is professor of literature, technology and publishing at Birkbeck, University of London. Previously he was a senior lecturer at Birkbeck, a lecturer in English at the University of Lincoln, UK, and an associate tutor/lecturer at the University of Sussex, where he completed his PhD.

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