Freemium as a Sustainable Economic Model for Open Access Electronic Publishing in Humanities and Social Sciences

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Abstract. Between the two paths of open access - green and gold - the later is the harder to develop and has the less support from the research community. The main difficulty is about finding a sound economic model. Open Access journals usually depend on two funding sources: subsidies and/or donations from institutions and publication fees from research units in the authors-pay model. These two ways of funding open access journals and books proved effective in some cases (Plos), but are not flawless. The Center for Open Electronic Publishing, a french initiative for open access publishing in humanities and social sciences, has recently developed a new economic model based on “freemium” for its full open access journals and books series, in order to address two issues: improve their economical soundness and give them more visibility in libraries. Freemium, the contraction of “free” and “premium”, preserves open access to information together with the marketing of premium services.

Keywords. open access, humanities, social sciences, freemium, economic models

Introduction

The movement for open access has scored a number of victories since its early days. The first was to establish itself as a proven and legitimate mode of communicating academic findings. This success is all the more remarkable as it has been achieved via two channels: the green road, relating to open archives; and the gold road, relating to open access academic publications. In the domain of open archives, ArXiv is the most striking success story with 745 000 articles deposited by their authors themselves. In the domain of open access publications, it is the Plos platform with its 7 journals which is the most often cited, and quite rightly so. The fact that a growing number of commercial publishers like Elsevier or Springer offer a range of open access publications, having resisted the movement for years, is a further proof of success. It would be fitting for the partisans of open access to adopt Ghandi’s favourite phrase: “First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win.” The success stories should not prevent us asking questions about the way open access resources operate in different countries and disciplines. In the humanities and social sciences in particular, where, unlike most academic disciplines, the book is a more
important type of publication than the journal article, the situation is not quite so straightforward.

In France for example, most humanities publishers are opposed to open access for their journals and book collections. An evaluation of the state of open access developments within the country is relatively easy to draw up, due to the centralisation of platforms publishing online content. The three main French platforms dealing with publications in the humanities and social sciences are Cairn.info, Revues.org and Persee.fr. Between them, the trio publish more than 630 journals, a total of 62% of the estimated total number of active journals in humanities and social sciences disciplines². Across the corpus, only 184 journals are published in full open access. The other journals restrict access to the articles via an embargo period of one to five years, depending on the journal. While the total number of articles available in open access can be estimated at more than 400 000 articles, thanks to retrospective open access digitisation initiatives like Persée³, the number of new articles published in open access each year is only 4000 articles of a total estimate of 22 000, which is a fairly low proportion.

In the humanities and social sciences, books form the dominant and most recognised mode of communicating research results. The question of open access for the online distribution of works in the humanities and social sciences was not a key issue for books until recently, quite simply because most of them were not distributed online. However, in the last few years, due to several combined factors, among which the massive digitisation of books via the Google Books program is certainly the most significant, publishers have started to digitise their catalogue, while also distributing new publications via electronic bookstores. In the vast majority of cases, works that are not part of the public domain are not available on open access. Initiatives taken by new digital publishers like the Open Humanities Press or Open Book Publishers on the one hand, and by university press publications within consortiums like Oapen on the other, are very interesting from this perspective. They are however relatively marginal in relation to production from major publishers in different countries, like the Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press, Presses Universitaires de France or De Gruyter for example, all of which propose restricted access.

This paper identifies two factors that prejudice open access distribution of humanities and social sciences publications: on the one hand, economic models currently used for this mode of distribution are fragile; while on the other, university libraries are struggling to guarantee their traditional role as documentary mediators for open access content. The article also presents a recent experiment, implemented in February 2011 by the French platform, OpenEdition.org, known as the OpenEdition Freemium program. This commercial model devised for libraries managing open access humanities and social sciences content aims to provide a pragmatic and political response to the two obstacles hindering the development of open access identified earlier.

² Archambault Éric, Vignola-Gagné Étienne, "L'utilisation de la bibliométrie dans les sciences sociales et les humanités", 2004 evaluated the total number of French journals in humanities and social sciences at approximately 2000 in 2004. In 2010, INIST established a list of 1058 active journals in France: http://www.inist.fr/spip.php?article85

³ Estimation based on the number of documents indexed by the French search engine Isidore: http://www.rechercheisidore.fr
1. Economic models for open access publication

There are two economic models that dominate the field of open access academic publications, amongst those identified by J. Willinsky as the “ten flavors of open access”[1]. One is subsidy based and the other has an author-pays model.

1.1. Subsidies

The subsidy model is particularly widespread among humanities and social sciences publications, where open access publishing is often financed in advance, by grants from different research institutions (universities, scholarly societies, foundations and governments). Support for publication takes various forms: financial, naturally, but also through the provision of staff (such as copy or layout editors) and workspace, domain hosting and technical support. In the French case for example, journals have free access to the Revues.org and Persee.fr platforms’ services, which have been developed thanks to funding from the Ministry for Research and Higher Education, as well as from establishments like the CNRS, l’EHESS, and the Universities of Provence, Avignon and Lyon. The Oapen platform, for its part, was developed thanks to financing from the European commissions, while Scielo is supported by several regional, national and intergovernmental agencies in South America. While “infra-structural” support, in the form of distribution platforms, often comes from governments or consortia, due to their size, support for daily editorial activity for journals comes mainly from local structures. A number of journals are the expression of a specific university department or a scholarly society. The list of journal publishers on the Revues.org platform demonstrates this investment by university structures in the distribution of open access content. Beside commercial publishing houses and the university press, there are a large number of university departments, research laboratories and scholarly societies.

The organically dependent relationship of a journal to a local research structure needs to be examined carefully, to question whether it is ideally compatible with the openness required for a genuine academic journal. Do journals based in university departments, who often finance them completely, have the leeway to escape what is termed “university localism”, a mindset that many agree is harmful to the quality of a publication? Some journals do indeed find the ways to overcome such constraints to become, through the diversity of their contributors and their openness, reference journals in their field of study. In such situations however, university departments find it harder to mobilise the means to support a journal that is no longer an expression of the department. The possibility from commercial income from the sale of issues and articles or from library subscriptions is often much sought after by the editorial teams of journals, not only as a basis for their economic model but also as a means to avoid “scraping around for grants” and to gain academic and intellectual independence in relationship to their host institutions.

The economic fragility created by a model of financing based wholly on grants should also be taken into account, as the provision of technical means, staff, loans and grants can be withdrawn at any moment. All it takes is turning trends, changes of direction, or, as is happening in a great many countries now, drastic financial restrictions mean generous financing may disappear from one day to the next. Ultimately, financing open access publications via subsidies alone reveals itself to be a very fragile model, from the academic and economic points of view, especially when it
sets out to support the heart of editorial activity (reviewing, copy editing) and does not
ensure the technical way it will be distributed online by shared platforms.

1.2. Author-pays model

The other predominant economic model in the field of open access academic
publications is the “author-pays” model. Like the previous model, finance comes
before and not after publication, and consists, essentially, in asking the authors of
books or articles to contribute to the publishing costs of their own works. As costs are
borne by the author, readers are not asked to contribute and content can hence be
distributed via open access. It is a mode that has been successfully implemented by the
Public Library of Science (Plos) and has provided the foundations for its economic
viability since its creation, attracting high-level academic publications. With 36 000
articles submitted for publication and 17 000 articles published in 2011, Plos (and
particularly Plos One, its flagship journal) could be justifiably termed a “mega journal”
whose dynamics are impressive. The cost of publishing articles in a Plos journal varies
between 1 300 to 2 900 dollars. On average in 2010, 12 million dollars were
invested indirectly in Plos by research institutions who took charge of the publication costs
of their own researchers.

The model that Plos offers has become so established in the academic field that it
has forced other actors, especially commercial publishers, to reposition themselves.
Hence commercial publishers now include within their classic commercial model based
on restricted access subscription or purchase, author-pays formulae allowing authors to
"free up" their publications (articles or books) by supporting publication costs. This is
the case of Springer with its Open Choice formula, of Elsevier with its sponsorship
program, and Oxford University Press with its Oxford Open model. The reasoning
most often put forward by open access advocates to support this model, is based on an
aggregation of costs associated with research and publication of results. For example,
Morris[2] argues that publishing costs represent less than 20% of the total cost of
research carried out to produce the publication content. From this perspective, viewed
as a whole, it seems absurd indeed for research organizations, who, having funded the
lion’s share of a research program, do not then add on the marginal costs of publication
involved in open access distribution, which radically improves the impact of research,
as several authors have proved.

One should however be wary of global perspectives. For while the author-pays
model may seem appropriate for certain situations and disciplines, it is unlikely it will
be widely adopted by others. It is probably no coincidence that it is so widespread
within life sciences. In these disciplines, publications are essentially team publications
– articles are signed by a number of authors. In social sciences the converse is true, the
vast majority of articles are signed by one or maybe two authors. The writing itself is
much less formal and constrained; style has more freedom than in the life sciences, and
better reflects its author’s personality, and the originality of the approach,
demonstrating the different relationship between research and publication in these
disciplines. This is not to say that authors should not be eligible for publication
subsidies in the humanities and social sciences. This is sometimes the case, and some

[4] All figures from Binfield, Peter, “The Public Library of Science”, at Berlin 9 conference, November 8,
large humanities and social sciences publishers have implemented open access systems, as have other publishers in other disciplines. It is difficult to imagine, however, this model becoming widespread in the humanities and social sciences unless it anticipates the effects of distortion or even radical alignment with the predominating models of publication and modes of writing in experimental sciences.

The author-pays model also poses another more general problem: that of the very definition of open access. One important argument in favour of open access is the need to overcome financial barriers to information access in order to make academic communication more effective, to encourage financial rationality and to bring ethical considerations into play (particularly in the life sciences). The same question must be asked of pre-publication financing systems, and especially that of the author-pays. If this system becomes more widespread, it is likely to create readily conceivable distortions in the field of research. It provides a mechanical advantage to research teams in wealthy research institutions (the Matthew effect). It also puts economic pressure on research institutions in the same way the classic publishing system puts pressure on these institution’s libraries, because the academic publishing market is as inflexible for researchers who publish as it is for subscriber libraries. There is also one important blind spot the author-pays system doesn’t account for: the role of mediating institutions within the open access documentary ecosystem, especially the role that libraries play.

2. The place of libraries in the gold road to open access

“The special nature of the open access model is that it displaces the problem: open access does not entail subscription or acquisition. Everything depends on whether an institution is involved in the movement, whether it has approved affiliation for its researchers, so that they are free to publish in open access journals. The notion of subscription is integral to other services, and is dependent on library budgets; affiliation, meanwhile, is funded by a different research management budget. We have to be careful here. Harsh reasoning would say that affiliation costs money, so I’ll draw it from the library’s budget because the library has stopped paying for subscriptions, so the budget can be transferred. I have personally never heard of such harsh examples, but the same reasoning may be operating implicitly […] For my part, I tend to think we have a mediating role: we are here to build collections and teach how to access them using our services, but in terms of abilities, this does not amount to the same thing. It is true that we currently have large budgets because resources are so expensive to acquire. Our role will definitely change if the economic model changes”. This is an excerpt from a 2009 Emma Bester’s survey of over twenty research libraries, focusing on the issue of open access asset visibility within their institutions’ humanities and social sciences sectors[3]. It beautifully sums up the survey’s main findings. Its author combines several methods, both quantitative (measurement of server logs, online surveys with closed questionnaires) and qualitative (semi-structured interviews, observation of IT systems within libraries) to assess the extent to which open access resources, such as those offered by Revues.org, were referenced, indexed, and promoted by the research libraries. The results of the survey are striking and bring up one particular problem that is seldom mentioned. While library staff are generally in favour of open access on an individual basis, while they actively seek whenever possible, to promote open access resources, this commitment is not readily compatible
with the way libraries themselves function in their role as documentary mediators, because it is motivated by libraries' financial drive towards documentary acquisition. The librarian interviewed summarizes the situation well. She/he explains libraries’ traditional role: first, buy resources, and then promote them to users. Thus, the real problem for open access resources in libraries is simple: they cannot be purchased. And thus, it is difficult for librarians to appropriate such resources and allocate time, staff and effort to exploiting them, if no deliberate conscious stand is taken. The reason is simple, and it is another interviewee who provides it: “Our discourse has become increasingly management-based, while our budgets have become tighter, and costs have increased. All the while, we have had to justify the money we spend and this leads us to promote what we pay for”.

The survey assessed the consequences of this contradiction in several different ways. In one example, the proportion of connections from libraries in relation to all visits to open access content on the Revues.org platform was shown to be minimal. An online questionnaire of Revues.org’s readership corroborates these results. Furthermore, assessment of the presence and quality of signposting to Revues.org’ services in libraries’ own IT system documentation reveals significant disparities between institutions. The opposite is true for payable resources, which are systematically valued and promoted.

The lack of coordination between libraries and open access resources revealed in Emma Bester’s survey reveals three areas of difficulty:

- It is prejudicial to readers who receive guidance and help for payable resources, but are left to their own devices – i.e. to Google - in regard to open access resources. Hence, libraries cease to act as mediators, and their role breaks down.
- It is prejudicial to producers of open access resources who do not benefit from the same support, financial support, naturally, but also in terms of the visibility and development of resources that libraries provide for other restricted access purchases.
- It is also prejudicial to libraries who risk being marginalized within the new emerging open access documentary ecosystem. If budgets transfer and practices change using other forms of mediation, the future of university libraries is under threat.

The situation hence becomes clearer. The two obstacles to the dominant model of open access distribution of research, namely the fragility of economic models and their relationship with university libraries’ primary missions, are part of one, and the same, problem. The question of finances, the question of use and the question of the nature and role of the ecosystem’s actors are intimately linked. In France, the Center for Open Electronic Publishing proposed recently a new economic model for humanities and social sciences publications in order to address this threefold issue. It is named OpenEdition freemium.
3. OpenEdition freemium

Since the founding of Revues.org by Marin Darcos in 1999[4], the Centre for Open Electronic Publishing team <http://cleo.cnrs.fr/> (Cleo) has been developing platforms and open access electronic publishing services for the humanities and social sciences and open access electronic publishing services for the humanities and social sciences.

Cleo is supported by four French research and higher education establishments: CNRS, EHESS, Université de Provence and Université d’Avignon. It also receives financing from two French cyber-infrastructures: the TGE Adonis and TGIR BSN (digital academic library). It is based in Marseille and has offices in Paris and Lisbon (Portugal). Cleo offers a full range of electronic publishing services enabling the research community, lecturers and students in the humanities and social sciences, as well as the general public, to access a coherent body of electronic resources published mainly in open access. The OpenEdition platform, <http://www.openedition.org>, inaugurated early 2011, offers a single access point to all these resources which are distributed over three platforms: Revues.org with more than 330 journals, a total of over 80,000 open access documents; Calenda distributing more than 18000 conference research programs in all disciplines of the humanities and social sciences; and Hypotheses.org home to more than 350 research blogs.

After 10 years developing online publication services, in partnership with universities, research teams and university publishers[5], Cleo sought to expand this collaboration to include libraries. The aim was to enable libraries to promote visibility of open access resources and to draw them into a more active role in financing open access publications.

This is why Cleo devised in 2011 a new program named OpenEdition freemium. The program is based on freemium economic model, used by many Internet companies today. Freemium was explained for the first time by the venture capitalist Fred Wilson on his blog in 2006 and strongly popularized by the journalist Chris Anderson in his book Free : the future of a radical price[6]. “freemium”, as the portemanteau word indicates, combines “free” access to some services with licensing of other “premium” ones. The use of freemium model in OpenEdition combines free access to information (e.g. full text articles and books in open access) with licensing of premium services to libraries[7].

It relies mainly on a distinction between formats: full text is accessible through HTML whereas other formats, usually preferred by professional readers, such as PDF and ePub are restricted to subscribing libraries users. Supplementary services for libraries and their users are packed with the offer:

- **Premium access to journals and book series:** Libraries subscribing to OpenEdition Freemium offer their users the possibility to download PDF and ePub files of articles and books without quota and without DRM of the journals and book series that have adopted Open Access Freemium model. This download is possible from each journal’s site but also using the Revues.org Bookserver enabling the simple download of files in ePub format on mobile devices such as readers, tablets and smartphones.

- **Back office:** Apart from coverage lists, monitoring the state of collections and providing server visiting statistics, subscription to OpenEdition Freemium
provides campus statistics in conformity with the COUNTER norm. These statistics are available in a private online space and are updated daily.

- **Export of records in MARC formats**: The catalogue of journals and books available on Revues.org has been made user-friendlier by making its descriptions available in the UNIMARC and MARC21 formats. Libraries subscribing to OpenEdition Freemium can automatically integrate these records in their ILMS, by downloading ISO2709 files or by using a Z39.50 server.

- **Webservice Calenda**: Users have access to Calenda’s database using simple requests relating to all available fields (dates, places, categories, event partners, etc.). Requests use the Calenda web service, an API which produces data flows in several formats (ATOM, JSON, RSS, iCal). They can be displayed and consulted on all types of website, like institutions’ own digital workspaces, documentary platforms, and departmental or laboratory web pages. It is thus possible to display all events taking place on a specific campus, city, or site. It is also possible to filter events by discipline or type, etc. The library has the right to open up the use of this service to the whole campus or institution to which it belongs, becoming a mediator of this advanced tool for Calenda.

- **Alerts and subscriptions**: OpenEdition also offers an alert service enabling users to automatically receive alerts based on keywords of their choice by email. The service notifies the user each time a chosen expression appears on Revues.org, Calenda, or Hypotheses.org. The service is highly customisable and it is possible to add filters, by requesting information from the Calenda platform only, for example. It is also possible to refine the search to specific fields, to request alerts for articles published by a specific author, or limit the search to title and extracts only. Alerts are limited to 3 per user. Subscribers to OpenEdition Freemium have unlimited access.

- **Assistance**: Libraries and campuses who sign up to OpenEdition Freemium have direct access, by email and telephone, to a technical assistant who answers any questions relating to the platform’s functioning and the state of collections.

- **Training**: Libraries subscribing to OpenEdition Freemium also benefit from on-site or online training, in French or English, of library staff, including the presentation of the platform’s resources, tools and new features. Cleo regularly organises training in electronic publishing, how to use the Lodel software, and academic blogging in general. Staff from subscribing libraries have priority access to Cleo’s summer university of open electronic publishing, involving around 100 participants every two years in Marseille. The theme this year was “The circulation of knowledge in the digital age: the alliance between authors, publishers, librarians, and readers around the digital book.” <http://leo.hypotheses.org/5851>

- **Management**: Libraries opting for the premium services can participate in the Cleo user committee’s activities. The committee is composed of publishers of journals and book series on Revues.org, publishers of scholarly blogs on Hypotheses.org, Calenda partner institutions and libraries. The users’ committee meets once a year and is constantly engaged in development work through workgroups operating in situ or at a distance on such areas as referencing and bibliometrics, internationalisation, bibliographical tools, the
quality of metadata, and the relationship with libraries, among others. The members of the user committee receive Cleo’s annual activity report (in French).

Two-thirds of income from libraries subscriptions is allocated to those journals and partner publishers who adopt the freemium model. The other third enables the Cleo to develop the platform. All income created by OpenEdition Freemium is then reinvested in the development of open access academic publishing. For 2013, 85 academic journals and 20 publishers providing 1200 books participate to OpenEdition freemium program. Thanks to an “Equipex” grant from the french gouvernement, Cleo will be able to digitise and disseminate through OpenEdition freemium, 15 000 books in every discipline of humanities and social sciences and several languages before 2020. The grant will help Cleo to develop new services and internationalize its platforms as well. In 2012, 32 librariaies from around the world subscribed to OpenEdition freemium’. The pricing model for libraries is very classic. It is based on the GDP PC of the country and the number of students or staff members of the institution subscribing to the offer. The offer and its pricing model has been negotiated with libraries consortia such as Couperin in France and the Crepuq in Canada.

Conclusion

Electronic publishing is desperately seeking new economic models[8]. “Information wants to be free” seems to be the slogan of the age of Internet. But the famous citation from Steward Brand should be heard entirely: “On the one hand information wants to be expensive, because it's so valuable. The right information in the right place just changes your life. On the other hand, information wants to be free, because the cost of getting it out is getting lower and lower all the time. So you have these two fighting against each other”. Of course, the tension between the two principles has an impact on business models in the publishing industry. But it impacts also the role of information intermediaries, such as libraries, which give value to information. OpenEdition freemium is a proposal to address the Brand contradiction in a limited sector of publishing without discarding traditional players such as publishers and libraries. In that case, the plateform, OpenEdition, doesn’t try to supersed them but rather helps

\[5\] Here is the list of subscribing libraries in march 2012 : Agence Universitaire de la francophonie (40 french speaking campuses around the world), Aix-Marseille Université, Bibliothèque cantonale et universitaire de Lausanne (Suisse), Bibl Public de Wallonie (Belgique), Bibliothèque de l’Université de ..., Bibliothèque Denis Diderot (Lyon), Bibliothèque interuniversitaire Sainte-Geneviève (Paris), Bibliothèque publique d’information (Paris), Bibliothèque Sainte-Barbe (Paris), Bibliothèques de l’Université d’Angers, Columbia University Libraries (USA), École des Hautes études en sciences sociales (EHESS, France), École nationale des sciences de l’information et des bibliothèques à Lyon (Ensib), Institut des sciences humaines et sociales (INSHS, France), Institut des Sciences et Industries du Vivant et de l’Environnement (AgroParisTech), Institut français de recherche en Afrique (Nigeria), Deutsches Historisches Institut in Paris (DHI-P-IAH), Institut national de recherche en sciences et technologies pour l’environnement et l’agriculture (Inrsea, ex. Cemagref, France), Institut Supérieur d’Informatique et de Gestion de Ouagadougou (Burkina Fasso), Instituto de Estudos Sociais e Económicos em Maputo (Mozambique), SCD de l’Université de Lille 3, SCD de l’Université de Pau et des Pays de l’Adour, SCD de l'Université des Antilles et de la Guyane, SCD de l’Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, Sciences Po. Paris, Université Blaise Pascal à Clermont- Ferrand, Université d’Avignon et des Pays de Vaucluse, Université de Savoie, UQAM (Université du Québec à Montréal), Université François-Rabelais de Tours, Université Sciences et Technologies-Lille 1, Université Sorbonne nouvelle-Paris 3
them build an alliance for the free dissemination of knowledge in the new digital environment.

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