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# **Collective Funding to Reclaim Scholarly Publishing**

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The open access movement has dropped barriers to readers only to erect them for authors. The reason is the article processing charge (APC), which typically runs \$3,000 to \$5,000. The APC model, with its tolled access to authorship, is the subscription model seen through a camera obscura: author paywalls in place of reading paywalls.

Most scholars cannot afford the steep fees, a fact masked by the privileged segment who can: scientists in the rich industrialized world, and scholars in a handful of wealthy European countries and North American universities. The fees are often paid via [so-called “read-and-publish” deals](#), which fold APCs into the subscription contracts that libraries negotiate with publishers.

The emerging APC regime is also [re-anointing](#) the commercial oligopolists—the same five firms that fleece universities through usurious subscription charges. Springer Nature, Elsevier, and their peers are, with every read-and-publish deal, transitioning their enormous profit margins from tolled to open—and capturing the lion’s share of library spending in the process. Librarians continue to fund the tolled system, while also—at the richer institutions—picking up the tab for their faculty’s author fees. The result is an incumbent-publisher spending lockdown, one that ratifies the APC regime.

Any alternative to the prevailing scholarly communication system must be built atop a different funding model, one that excludes neither readers nor authors. In broad strokes, that model will center on direct support for publishing, drawn from funds currently allotted to subscription and APC spending. The same funders who finance the tolled-and-APC system—libraries but also foundations and government agencies—will, on this approach, redirect budgets to underwrite a diverse, community-led publishing ecosystem. Call it the collective funding model, predicated on open access for both readers and authors.

Collective funding is an appealing idea, versions of which have been circulating since at [least 2006](#), with [important variations](#) on the [theme published since](#). The challenge is getting the model to work beyond a handful of successful, single-resource experiments (including the [ArXiv](#) preprint server, the [Open Library of Humanities](#), and the [SCOAP<sup>3</sup>](#) particle physics journals, among others). The two main hurdles are coordination and funder participation. The academic communication system involves thousands of funders and hundreds of publishers, which makes for a nightmarish coordination challenge. A related obstacle, one made much worse with lots of actors, is the free

rider problem. Fee-free open access is a [public good that benefits everyone](#), even non-payers; if enough libraries opt out, the collective funding scheme is [likely to collapse](#).

These challenges must be faced with head-on sobriety. One practical advantage of the author-pay (APC) and reader-pay (subscription) alternatives is that they operate as markets for private goods. Both are rife with failures—above all the oligopoly’s [lopsided market power](#), built through the prestige lock-in of the established journal hierarchy. Even so, librarians and other funders purchase goods for their campus constituencies, in the form of reader or author access. Elsevier may [charge \\$20,508](#) for an annual *Journal of Chromatography* subscription—and *Nature* [\\$11,390 to publish OA](#)—but at least the benefits flow to the library-buyer. These costs, of course, aren’t sustainable even for rich institutions, but the point is that the prevailing ecosystem is funded through the [uncoordinated coordination of a market](#). Many buyers and a handful of sellers strike deals for access on the basis of price, as disciplined (in theory) by demand.



## Collective action for collective funding

The tolled/APC system is broken, but the reasons it’s so hard to launch a collective-funding alternative are the twinned problems of free-ridership and coordination. As famously outlined in Marcur Olson’s [The Logic of Collective Action](#) (1965), public goods are plagued by a dilemma: Even when there’s an agreed-upon common benefit, self-interested actors won’t work together to achieve shared ends, especially in big groups. According to Olson, the costs of coordination are too high, and would-be participants fear that others won’t contribute yet still reap the benefits.

Olson’s logic rests on a faulty assumption, that we’re all self-interested; librarians, like lots of the rest of us, aren’t utility-maximizers in the economist’s narrow sense. [Decades of empirical evidence](#) has shown that Olson was far too pessimistic. Yet even critics, among them [Nobelist Elinor Ostrom](#), concede that collective action is [hard to pull off](#).

In scholarly publishing, the parts are all moving. Stakeholders include not just funders and publishers, but also the authoring, reviewing, and reading faculty—together with students and the general public. We face the special challenge of a rich and wily cartel hellbent on sustaining obscene margins. There is even friendly fire from [Coalition S](#),

the group of European funders responsible for [Plan S](#). By [promoting “transformative” deals like read-and-publish](#)—and by dropping a [planned APC cap](#)—the Coalition is essentially greasing the gears of the conglomerates’ OA capture. Despite [crumbs for “diamond,” fee-free OA journals](#), the practical effect of Plan S may be to “transform” for-profit, high-subscription journals into for-profit, high-APC journals—and thereby Hoover up all the library spending. That’s happening now, deal by deal across the rich West. The scholarly communication system is already skewed northward. In an APC world—one in which wealth buys authorship—that’s going to get worse.

So we need workable collective-funding alternatives, before it’s too late. One promising candidate, at least for legacy publishers, is [“subscribe-to-open” \(S2O\)](#): The idea, in essence, is for libraries to commit tolled-title subscription spending to support journals’ transition to APC-free open access. [Annual Reviews](#) and [Berghahn](#) have established the S2O model’s viability, with lots of recently announced initiatives (and a [late-breaking Plan S endorsement](#)) generating momentum. Meanwhile, a handful of legacy university presses—including [MIT](#), [Michigan](#), and [CEU Press](#)—have announced similar schemes for book publishing. These are exciting models, but they won’t work for born-OA publishers. The S2O-style journal and book approach benefits from established spending commitments and (in some cases) back-catalog access and/or the threat of closed-access reversion. Born-OA publishers have no such private-good leverage.

Another no-fee OA model is direct institutional support: Most Latin American journals operate with [host-university subsidies](#). In North America, in-house library publishing—with staff and logistical support paired to faculty editing—has been growing steadily since the [Library Publishing Coalition](#)’s 2013 founding. Even a few OA university presses, like the UK’s [UCL Press](#), rely on direct university subsidy. This host-centered model, whereby a single university underwrites one or more publishing initiatives, is susceptible to scale and free-rider pressures—since everyone benefits from the institution’s solo investment. But it’s a proven approach, one that can and should ground some share of a no-fee OA future.

So there are indeed collective-funding alternatives to the APC. But none of these is well-suited to the independent, born-OA publisher. Full disclosure: I have a horse in this race, as the director of a [small, scholar-led OA press](#). Still, figuring out how to fund such initiatives, as well as critical infrastructure like the [Directory of Open Access Journals](#), is an urgent challenge—a baseline for any non-commercial publishing system open to readers and authors alike. Radical alternatives to the prevailing order, like

the [publish-review-curate \(PRC\) model](#), will likewise require collective funding of a sustainable kind. Yet it's the born-OA experimenters who are most threatened, arguably, by the collective-action problems of free-ridership and coordination.<sup>1</sup>

## The match-making model

Enter the *mission-aligned funding exchange* (MAFE). The core idea is to create matching platforms that connect fee-free OA publishers and infrastructure stewards with mission-aligned patrons in the library and foundation worlds. These markets, crucially, are not mediated by “price” alone, but instead by alignments in values. Libraries and funders, in other words, furnish direct support to [nonprofit](#), community-led publishers and services on web-based matching platforms that double as fiscal clearinghouses. In this model, funders and recipients alike elaborate mission criteria, with the recipients supplying additional structured information on scope, governance, licensing, and related information.

There isn't much on the ground yet. LYRASIS, the big North American library consortium, is wrapping up a successful, [small-scale pilot of an exchange](#), with special emphasis placed on mission-alignment. At least two other MAFE-style exchanges are in the planning stages: a [book-based platform](#) from the UK-based COPIM initiative and the German [KOALA project](#).

One straightforward promise of the mission-aligned funding exchange is improved coordination. Librarians rightly complain of the burdensome logistics of one-off funding requests, including the challenge of vetting applicants. The exchange model is designed to relieve some of that burden, in a strategic but heavily qualified mimicry of a traditional market. Funders—with their own (preferably elaborated) value commitments—browse would-be recipients who have stated their own values. Answers to standardized questions stipulated by the exchange, furnished by publishers and infrastructure providers, offer libraries and other funders a basis for allocating scarce resources over multiple-year commitments.

In the MAFE model, the publishers must be nonprofit and community-led. Each press or journal provides detailed cost and publishing projections, and commits to uniform transparency and reporting requirements. Once a publisher has its stated funding needs met, library and other funders can seek out other worthy recipients. Aspiring publisher-participants are vetted by the exchange, according to principles and criteria endorsed through [community governance](#). That last point is crucial: Any successful

exchange will require a shared, tripartite form of governance, with genuine participation from funders, publishers, and scholars. Each of these communities, for the exchange's legitimacy and durable bonds of trust, must have a say in how the basic rules and expectations are set.

To my knowledge, the idea for such an exchange was first elaborated by Jack Hyland, Alexander Kouker, and Dmitri Zaitsev, in a [2019 \*Insights\* paper](#). Their scheme, however, stresses competition on price and quality grounds over value resonance as the key matching mechanism. It was LYRASIS's Sharla Lair, working with UC Berkeley's Rachael Samberg, who introduced the crucial mission component. In their Open Access Community Investment Program (OACIP) [pilot proposal](#), Lair and Samberg placed mission-alignment at the exchange's center. Their community-driven approach, they wrote, could benefit “bespoke OA programs, output from smaller non-profit or OA-native publishers, or niche scholarly output”—diverse projects without easy access to other funding sources. The pilot's participating journals were required to spell out their commitments and plans in a [structured criteria form](#) to apprise would-be funders.

COPIM's exchange, slated to launch in spring 2022, plans to operate a similar web-based platform, though centered on book publishers. In a [recent report](#), COPIM researchers outlined the core principles meant to guide the exchange's development, including collaborative governance. One key innovation of the COPIM platform, as conceived, is to encourage applicants to bundle their funding appeals.

The [ScholarLed](#) group of publishers, for example, might collaborate on a single appeal for its members. The practical benefit of such exchange-participant nesting would be to foster a smaller, trust-based community with reduced vetting burdens on librarian-funders. The risk is that such bundles could become club-like and favor already-connected publishers from the Global North. An explicit, platform-wide commitment to [bibliodiversity](#) should be written in to each exchange's charter.

## Custody battles

As historian Aileen Fyfe [has shown](#), the current joint-custody arrangement—non-profit universities and for-profit publishers—is a recent and reversible development. The work of reversal, of restoring custody, means bringing the funding [back into the community](#). We can, at the same time, deliver open access in the full, meaningful sense

—which is to say, for readers *and* for authors. This means ruling out the author-excluding APC.

The alternative is collective funding, of one kind or another. In practice, this means that libraries and other funders will underwrite a system that, at its core, is based on ability to pay. This is as it should be: Harvard and the Dutch university system *ought* to contribute a lot more, per student capita, than the University of Ghana. No one’s ability to publish anywhere should ever hinge on whether they or their employer can afford the fees.

There’s nothing utopian about this premise: When we say that worthy authors should be able to publish regardless of wealth, we’re defending the most uncontroversial, baseline value of the university tradition. How could anyone, outside Elsevier’s boardroom, hold otherwise?

That leaves the practical matter of how to make a just OA system work. We have some promising collective-funding models—especially for legacy publishers looking to parlay subscription and book-sales revenues into support for fee-free open access. But that’s not an option for the emerging, born-OA ecosystem, which has nothing “legacy” to post as collateral.

Here’s where the mission-aligned funding exchange comes in. It’s a practical mechanism for connecting nonprofit funders with nonprofit publishers—a community-governed coordination tool for a system with many participants.

If we’re committed to restoring custody over scholarly publishing—and to furnishing open access for readers and authors alike—we need to push for what is the only fair way forward: collective funding.



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## Footnotes

1. True, single-publisher membership schemes like [punctum books](#) are working, and crowd-funding initiatives like [SCOSS](#) have channeled crucial funds to open infrastructure. But solo-resource publisher schemes may have reached the edge of libraries' logistical tolerance; likewise, the SCOSS-style winner-take-all approach isn't designed for scale nor sustainability. [↵](#)