Sustainable open access for scholarly journals in 6 years – the incubator model at Utrecht University Library Open Access Journals

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Key points
- Humanities and the social science journals need flexible funding models.
- Pragmatism and collaboration are key to transforming traditional publishing initiatives.
- The Uopen Journals model sets a 6-year development target for developing sustainable journals.
- Actively involved editors are key to a journal’s success.

For the best part of the past two decades, open access has been – and still is – a high priority for Utrecht University. As a result, back in 2003, Igitur, Utrecht Publishing & Archiving Services, was founded (which changed into Utrecht University Library Open Access Journals in 2014). The commitment of Utrecht University to open access was emphasized when, in 2005, the executive board signed the Berlin Declaration along with a few other Dutch research institutions. Next the university started the Utrecht University Repository to sustainably archive publications from its researchers and make them freely available. And in 2012, Utrecht University started an Open Access Fund that is still open for submissions today.

Since the early 2000s, we have seen the setup of smaller publishing units with open access components, often in relation with the rise of university repositories. As Sarah Kalikman Lippincott noted in 2016: ‘Library-based publishing services have likewise emerged organically over the past several decades, largely in response to the perceived gaps in and frustrations with the current publishing system [...]’ (Lippincott, 2016). Especially in recent years, it is clear that there is a renewed interest in institutional publishing. Chadwell and Sutton said that: ‘OA and library publishing share an intertwined future, and that future promises to be one of the most intriguing aspects in the evolution of academic libraries over the next twenty years’ (Chadwell & Sutton 2014). Whether it is directly related to the university or university library, there is a growing amount of open access-minded, institutional-based, publishing service models coming to light. This renewed uptake has all to do with the rise of open access and funder’s requirements that come along with it. And since traditional publishers have been somewhat reluctant to implement open access in their journal and book programmes, institutions are driven to do it themselves (Chadwell & Sutton, 2014; Poynder, 2013). Presses like UCL Press and White Rose University Press (the latter being a collaboration between the universities of Leeds, Sheffield, and York) are set up as traditional university press enterprises but with a sole mission to publish all the books and journals in open access.

Presses like Stockholm University Press and Göttingen University Press are examples of university publishing venues residing within their university libraries, making them a bit different from the traditional ‘university press’ in terms of being a business enterprise. This could mean that experimenting with new
distribution models such as open access is not necessarily subject to commercial business decisions. But what they all have in common is the focus on open access as the main publishing and distribution model (Hahn, 2008).

At Utrecht University, we have several years’ experience of institutional publishing by hosting and publishing a suite of gold open access journals within the Utrecht University Library. But in 2015, we decided to do it differently (Werner, 2015).

**INCUBATOR**

Instead of steering towards another open access publishing venue, the Utrecht University Library developed a new strategy to support open access journal publishing – one that shifted our focus from hosting journals to the development of high-quality, peer reviewed journals, setting a 6-year period for them to implement a sustainable publishing model based on open access. The choice of 6 years was made because our experience has been that a journal is really on track only after 4 years. Then there are 2 more years to strengthen and develop the publication strategy. We divided the 6-year period into two parts. After an initial 3 years, there will be a contract renewal if things are going well, and we can adjust certain strategies and make new arrangements if required. If, however, we question the viability of the journal, the contract will be terminated at this point.

This new strategy was initiated because of our previous experience running the library’s open access unit (Igitur Publishing) from 2003 until 2014. Besides journals, Igitur published PhD theses and a few academic book series edited by Utrecht University scholars. The growing portfolio had become very hard to maintain without expanding the publishing team. More and more we became a hosting and technical service provider rather than a publishing partner who was up-to-speed with the ever-developing world of open access and digital publishing technologies.

We came to the conclusion that the best possible way to help the scholarly community of Utrecht University with journal publishing would be to try out a different approach to open access publishing: experimenting with different business models and find out what works and what does not. And so our focus shifted to finding a long-term solution for our journals rather than supporting them with their daily routine. In the old model, we hosted the journals ourselves, using Open Journal Systems software. For the incubator model, we sought collaboration with the Ubiquity Partner Network in London.

Some journals in the existing portfolio of 14 journals have managed to acquire a journal impact factor (IF) within a reasonable period of time. Examples are the International Journal of Integrated Care (IJIC), International Journal of the Commons (IJC), and BMGN – Low Countries Review. IFs are heavily debated (see e.g. Callaway, 2016; Larivière et al., 2016) and should be approached cautiously. Nevertheless, for all the three journals the very moment they acquired an IF they saw an increase in the number of submissions. For IJIC and IJC, this increase also led to the successful implementation of an article processing charge (APC)-based funding model.

Some other journals in the Uopen Journals portfolio do have a well-organized editorial workflow and offer high-quality content, but still experience financial challenges. Overall, it is a diverse list. Each journal is unique and therefore requires a different approach. We look for solutions in all kinds of direction and encourage experiments with funding models, whether by looking at different business models such as freemium/premium, investing a cooperative approach, or some kind of cooperation with an initiative or a publisher.

**HOW?**

In his 2012 article, ‘The future role of publishing services in university libraries’, Tyler Walters discussed four possible scenarios of institutional publishing that the university library could support. In the fourth scenario, ‘Libraries as curators and consultants in publishing’, he says the following: ‘Libraries may key on roles that are less about production and more about consulting, instruction, and content stewardship. They may focus on assisting faculty with rights issues and promoting awareness of open access approaches to disseminating scholarly resources’ (Walters, 2012). With the incubator model, we have deliberately moved to this scenario: being a library as curator of scholarly research and consultant in publishing.

The Uopen Journals team offers publishing expertise on various levels. We support the editorial workflow: our editorial coordinator and publishing assistant support our journal managers with copy flow, contact with possible typesetting partners, website adjustments, and many other tasks. Uopen Journals also offer guidance related to business models: many open access journals are funded by either an affiliated association or an external sponsor, or are looking for new ways to cover costs. We advise journal managers on innovative or more traditional financial models. Thirdly, outreach or public engagement is a flourishing initiative in academic publishing since sharing knowledge with the public can drive progress. The Uopen Journals online marketer supports our journal managers in setting up a marketing strategy or creating campaigns. We also support sustainable archiving using the CLOCKSS network.

The in-house period of 6 years is mostly subsidized by the library and is only available to journals that have a link with Utrecht University. Only a reasonable fee is charged for using the infrastructure. The journals start at different stages in terms of development but they all are meant to leave the incubator after the aforementioned period of 3–6 years. At the end of the programme, they are expected to have developed a sustainable financial model, which means that they run at least at break-even, and to have some proven impact in their field. Impact does not only mean acquiring a journal IF but we also take into account network penetration, user statistics, article-level metrics, and other indicators.
As a service of the Utrecht University Library, we embrace the open access principles.

Besides some common open access principles such as the use of Creative Commons licensing and retention of article copyright by the authors, one of the most crucial aspects is that editorial boards (or their respective owners other than the publisher) own the copyrights or their journals, following the FAIR principles of open access stated by the FAIR Open Access Alliance (https://fairoa.org/). At Uopen Journals, editorial boards’ representatives and/or their related institution are in charge from the start. Not only do we think this is the right thing to do, we also think that it makes the transfer process as easy as possible. The Uopen Journals will mediate and give advice. The editorial board makes the decision(s). We consider ourselves to be facilitators rather than advocates. This is also clearly visible in our focus. The Uopen Journals aim to resolve the HOW-question: How can one publish an open access scholarly journal in a sustainable manner? What are long-term solutions? This is a challenge for all disciplines, maybe even more pressing for the humanities and the social sciences (HSS) (Eve, 2014).

An important step in the incubator model is to create a publishing roadmap. This map will act as a framework for the period of development within the library. Uopen Journals and the journal’s editorial board will also draw up financial plans in line with the foreseen growth of the journal (e.g. by gradually introducing APCs) and sketch a possible transfer scenario (e.g. publisher, institution, or foundation). Together we outline goals in terms of usage, reach, and impact that would make such a transfer feasible. The library’s publishing team collaborates with the boards of each journal in many ways, in order to ensure that these goals are reached.

In short, we try to prepare the journals for the open access market by developing them into high-quality open access journals and helping to find a sustainable financial model.

**LESSONS LEARNED SO FAR**

With the constant changing world of open access publishing, it is important to stay on top of recent developments and initiatives. The Uopen Journals incubator is available for all disciplines. In the last 5 years, we have received primarily requests from researchers from the HSS. We believe that this is directly related to the fact that more options are available for open access publishing in the sciences than in the HSS areas. However, the difficulties experienced in the HSS in finding a sustainable open access future are getting more and more attention from funders and bring to life (often scholarly led) initiatives such as the Open Library of Humanities and Humanities Commons; all the more, the reason to stay on top of recent developments within the constant changing world of open access publishing.

It is of great importance to introduce a more business-like approach and support editors and the journal’s owning institutions to adopt a stronger sense of cost awareness and market relevance. This is without doubt challenging, but it is helpful to make the chief editors aware of a more entrepreneurial mindset. After all, the owner is responsible for the future of the journal, not Uopen Journals. And this is something we cannot emphasize enough.

The APC model is dominant in the sciences, but not an obvious choice for the arts and humanities, social sciences, or law. This forces us to look for answers in more creative models, such as freemium/premium models where the customer can access the information online in for example HTML, but needs to pay for extra services or other formats, and partnerships between different journals.

For the old portfolio, one journal (the Netherlands Journal of Geosciences, Geologie en Mijnbouw) moved back to a traditional subscription-based model at Cambridge University Press after having left the old Igitur publishing programme. It would have been better if a more creative form of cooperation could have been found as this would align with our desire for open access research. A more successful story has been the transfer of UIC to Ubiquity Press early 2016. UIC was developed within a large community and had a large impact in its field. A solid network, well-attended yearly conference, an active association, and the journal, were the right ingredients. The journal currently runs at Ubiquity Press as a gold open access journal charging APCs of 1,300 Euros.

We have investigated a publisher cooperation, but it failed because of the high costs requested to cover the risk of publishing in open access. There is a limit to what journals or their owners (relatively small organizations) can afford. However, we are still interested in seeking cooperation with publishers as we believe that a healthy relationship between different stakeholders (e.g. publishers and libraries) is part of journal development.

Our programme and criteria for selection have adapted following our experiences and lessons learnt. As a result we demand, besides a clear link with the local academic community, an active and entrepreneurial editorial board, and a (reasonably good) financial basis (e.g. available funds for the initial 3 years, secured governance, etc.).

**RECENT DEVELOPMENTS**

We are constantly sharpening the ideas of the incubator and we have enhanced our services to connect with the changing world of scholarly publishing. There are a growing number of new initiatives that experiment with new open access models. Below are a few that have been successful so far and with which Uopen Journals have worked recently.

First we have the Open Library of Humanities (OLH) project. OLH opened its doors in September 2015 and have managed to attract over 250 libraries to their partnership programme. Besides publishing a mega-journal (the Open Library of Humanities) the OLH model offers an option for existing journals in the humanities to flip to open access without charging individual authors. So far, 16 journals have made the switch to open access and more are likely to follow soon.
In the slipstream of the launch of OLH, the LingOA project managed to flip three journals in the area of linguistics in 2015 and these are now published with OLH using the Ubiquity Press infrastructure. This has gained a lot of attention, and subsequently a few of the Uopen Journals titles have also shown great interest in joining the OLH platform. We are currently exploring possibilities of collaboration, even though the journals are already available in open access. An intriguing approach would be for instance if a group of our journals could join OLH as a separate entity, one way or the other.

Another initiative is the Knowledge Unlatched (KU) project. KU has been focusing primarily on making books available in open access. It offers a crowd-funding system that enables e-books to be made open access after sufficient pledges have been received from libraries. KU is now starting a pilot for journals in the HSS to make them available to the public. The Uopen Journals’ title, *International Journals of the Commons*, has been selected for the KU 2017 journal pilot. It is a well-established open access journal and this will be an interesting experiment, since it is already open access, it will be interesting to know for what (extra) services, like metadata imports of collection(s) and other enhancements to make the journals better accessible and more visible, libraries will be prepared to pledge.

Both initiatives have a different approach compared to the services of existing publishers, which are usually more focused on the APC model. The experience is that there is less uptake for the APC model in the HSS (see e.g. Eve, 2014; Mandler, 2014) and this is also reflected in the way the majority of open access journals in the HSS are being financed, which is without costs for the author in most cases (Kozak & Hartley, 2013). It is therefore of vital importance to at least try out some other business models. The two previously mentioned examples try to set up a business model in collaboration with university libraries (Eve, 2014). In the case of KU, both the author and the publisher would benefit. The publisher will see a secured revenue stream for open access content and the author gets an open access edition without any extra charges. The university libraries pay (or fund) the open access version. Will it be sustainable? It is too early to draw conclusions but as Uopen Journals we are engaging with these new services as well in order to gain enough experience with other open access business models.

**TOWARDS OPEN SCIENCE**

Another important driver is the debate on open science, which is getting some real momentum in the Netherlands. Several academic institutions, such as the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO), the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW), and all Dutch research universities, have explicitly committed themselves to open science. This resulted in a National Plan Open Science (www.openscience.nl), which was presented in The Hague in 2017. Towards 2020, this roadmap concentrates on three key areas:

- Promoting open access to scientific publications (open access).
- Promoting optimal use and reuse of research data.
- Adapting evaluation and award systems to bring them in line with the objectives of open science (reward systems).

Research libraries already play an important role in the first two goals and could possibly also be a partner in the adaptation of corresponding evaluation systems for recognition and rewarding. Since the debate on how to open up science is shifting towards the entire scholarly communication cycle, the responsibilities of all parties are getting more intertwined than ever before. If we want to push open access for publications, research data, and other scientific output, then funders, research institutions, libraries, and publishers need to strengthen existing engagement mechanisms.

**CONCLUSION**

We at Uopen Journals will adjust our publishing services in response to these developments, if necessary for instance by extending our focus beyond journal publishing to include other, non-traditional carriers of scholarly output. In short, we aim to support the communication needs and publishing efforts of our researchers according to their (changing) needs, external circumstances, and in a pragmatic and professional manner. The incubator model allows us to change our services along the immediate wishes of the editorial boards and individual researchers.

In the context of the changing world, we transformed from a traditional publishing venue into a solution-oriented advisory service with the underlying purpose to support our researchers. Important words in our model are pragmatism and collaboration. Via the incubator we try to improve the journals while navigating them through the current scholarly publication landscape. In other words, we first develop the journal and then in our search for sustainable solutions we proactively seek cooperation with other stakeholders in the scholarly publishing ecosystem, whether this involves traditional publishers, new initiatives, or organizations such as ourselves.

Despite the strong on-going emphasis on open access, the actual transition is going slower than expected. The field includes several networks and initiatives, projects, and communities that are fragmented by discipline and stakeholders (publishers, academics, repositories, etc.). Often these actors behave in quite an antagonistic manner. With the incubator approach, we try to mediate these different stakeholders by helping researchers to develop viable journals, and to interest publishers and publishing platforms in high-quality open access journals that can enrich their portfolio. And last but not least, we involve library colleagues – national and international – to set the standard for a new role in consultancy, curation, and stewardship. In this way, we seek solutions with respect to, and appreciation for, all stakeholders. And as the scholarly publishing world keeps on reinventing itself, we will continue to adjust our service wherever and whenever necessary.
COMPETING INTERESTS

Both authors declare that there are no competing interests.

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