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Subscribe to Progress: Advancing Equity Through Openness

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Published on: Aug 16, 2021

DOI: 10.21428/6ffd8432.20811f1e

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The open access business model Subscribe to Open (S2O) continues to capture attention from the scholarly publishing community. cOAlition S provided a [recent endorsement](#), stating it “encourages publishers to seriously consider the Subscribe to Open Model as a model for achieving full transformation to open access publishing and Plan S compliance.” [Wellcome Trust](#) now allows its funds to be used to pay for S2O costs. And, just recently, came [news that Project Muse](#), with funding from the Mellon Foundation, will study the viability of multiple coordinated S2O offers. If successful, they plan to move forward with the “design of a robust and multifaceted pilot program for journals in the humanities and social sciences.” This would be the largest and most ambitious implementation of S2O to date and the first time the model is applied to transition aggregated subscription content.

This all comes after an already busy year for S2O. Several publishers launched new S2O offers for 2021, including [EDP Sciences](#), [Pluto Journals](#), [Berghahn Journals](#) (now in its second year), and the [International Water Association](#) (IWA). [Annual Reviews](#), who originally developed the model and launched a pilot with 5 journals in 2020, has expanded its offering by adding 3 new journals for 2021. Annual Reviews also led the launch of what has become a lively and thriving S2O [Community of Practice](#), where publishers, librarians and funders share information in monthly meetings and on a [website](#) to support and promote the model.

This is exciting and remarkable progress for a model that is a relative newcomer to the world of scholarly publishing, and it raises some interesting questions. What accounts for S2O’s growing momentum? Why has it captured the interest of a growing number of publishers, librarians, and funders? Will it prove sustainable?

A librarian perspective on S2O

This essay seeks to answer these questions from the perspective of one of S2O’s key stakeholder groups: librarians. The authors work at two major US research libraries, the University of California, Los Angeles and Iowa State University. We are also both active participants in the S2O Community of Practice. It is apparent by now that scholarly publishing’s transition to open access is underway and [accelerating](#). Our libraries are strong supporters of S2O and believe it offers libraries and publishers a rapid, collaborative, smooth, and equitable option to achieve this transition. In our

view, S2O offers several advantages to libraries: ease of participation, author equity, and strong commitments to transparency.

Ease of library participation

First, S2O allows librarians a straightforward way to encourage publishers to convert entire subscription journals to open without having to create major new workflows or engage publishers in lengthy negotiations, such as those required by APC-based open access agreements. Instead, the publisher offers to make its journals available at the same price it had been charging for paywall subscriptions but guarantees that the content will be open if the requisite number of libraries participate in the S2O offering. If library participation is not maintained, the publisher reverts to a traditional subscription model which keeps the content behind a paywall. This is just one of many value propositions of S2O covered by this post that puts a check on free-riding, which is the most common critique against the model's viability.

The S2O offer process happens annually or at some designated frequency and encourages library and publisher engagement. Libraries can opt out if they prefer, but if they do, they increase the likelihood that the journal will remain toll-access and forgo any additional benefits exclusive to subscribers. In this way, it is in a library's own best interest to participate in the offer, because that is the only way to ensure ongoing access for their patrons, while also providing their faculty with cost-effective open access publishing opportunities. Finally, there are also logistical benefits for the library as S2O is also compatible with existing library renewal workflows. For example, to streamline participation, libraries can work with established subscription agents, such as EBSCO, using regular renewal processes to pay for S2O subscriptions, or utilize intermediaries like LYRASIS and Knowledge Unlatched, as part of established procurement processes, to channel open access funds into S2O.

Author equity

Another major advantage to S2O is found in the area of author equity. With funding coming through the traditional library subscription channel, no APCs are necessary at the author or institutional level. Barrier-free publishing is highly desirable by many libraries seeking to move scholarly communication in a more equitable direction. In addition, with S2O, the article submission process and editorial review for authors remain the same and librarians are spared the administrative burden of handling APCs. Authors gain the benefit of widespread dissemination of their work, as with other open models, but without the imposition of new requirements, bureaucracy, and

costs. Additionally, with the early adoption of this model by mid-sized publishers, including society publishers, librarians have an opportunity to diversify their open access initiatives and support faculty preferences for publishing in journals that fall outside of the large transformative agreements.

Transparency

The last advantage we will mention about S2O, transparency, may have more to do with the developing culture and practices of publishers using the model than the model itself. But we have been very excited to see that publishers adopting S2O demonstrate strong commitments to transparency in pricing. Pluto Journals, as part of their S2O offer, [has utilized](#) the Fair Open Access Alliance [Breakdown of Publication Services and Fees](#). EDP Sciences produced a comprehensive [transparency report](#) to accompany the introduction of their S2O model, which recognizes that “Transparency is an essential element for all stakeholders involved in the S2O model . . .” With EDP’s report, libraries and other subscribers are able to understand the costs of publication of their journals and how these costs are the basis for the development of the annual S2O financial model. Transparency has also been a regular topic of conversation in the S2O Community of Practice. Having access to accurate and up-to-date information about the costs S2O publishers incur will inform librarian selection processes and provide critical pricing knowledge that can be used in other types of journal negotiations.

Next steps: Library awareness and standardization

While S2O has the potential to enable and accelerate an equitable transition to open access, there are still obstacles to be navigated and details to be worked out. A [recent survey](#) by the S2O Community of Practice found awareness of S2O lags behind that of some other OA models. Nearly 30% of the 179 respondents, who came from 27 different countries, stated they were not familiar with the model. This may not be surprising, since S2O was only introduced two years ago, but it does suggest greater efforts must be made to inform the library community about the model and its benefits. One result of this finding is that the S2O Community of Practice has launched a communications working group to help share information about the model and to highlight relevant messaging from S2O publishers. It would be helpful as well to see more discussion and conversations within the library community about S2O, especially as offers continue to proliferate, lessons are learned, and adjustments need to be made.

As more publishers adopt S2O, evaluating offers and assessing their value may become more challenging and time consuming for libraries. For trusted nonprofit publishers, libraries may be predisposed to recognize the increased value of the offers. Commercial publishers, on the other hand, might be expected to demonstrate the value of their S2O offers more explicitly. Standardization and best practices in the areas of pricing transparency, reporting, offer timing, and communication will be increasingly important. For example, S2O offers extended through intermediaries could utilize a pricing transparency template that would make it easy for publishers to provide and for libraries to find this important information. S2O offers through Knowledge Unlatched could be gathered on an S2O dashboard, showing the status of offers, content made OA, and geographic and institutional readership and authorship. We have also learned that a publisher's timing is critical when bringing forward an S2O offer. The subscription renewal cycle, as publishers and libraries know, is relatively fixed. At our libraries, renewal data is gathered and analyzed in the spring, decisions to renew or cancel are finalized over summer, and this is then passed on to agents like EBSCO in the fall. If a publisher does not synchronize its S2O offer with this timeline, its offer may fail simply because it was introduced at the wrong time of year. These types of improvements will be critical if S2O is going to scale and prove sustainable – such growing pains are not unsurmountable and so we are optimistic that this model can and will succeed with library support.

An opportunity for librarians

The next few years will continue to be formative, exciting, and critical for S2O. In addition to the previously mentioned adoptions, S2O has branched into the open monograph space with the MIT Press's [Direct to Open](#) and Central European University's [Opening the Future](#) initiatives. There is every reason to expect more publisher adoption of S2O and continued S2O innovation. For librarians, this period presents an opportunity to help shape the development and direction of S2O. Through directly engaging with publishers and/or taking part in the S2O Community of Practice, librarians can help ensure S2O matures into a viable and sustainable alternative for open access transitions. We encourage librarians who see the same benefits as we do in S2O to get involved — and equally important, support the S2O offers that make sense for their collections.

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