

Virtual Seminar - Wayfinders #4: a deep-dive into S2O / Subscribe to Open – Q&A

Panelists: Anne Ruimy, Richard Gallagher, Wendy Queen and chaired by Malavika Legge

Q. Isn't Diamond OA the superior model compared to S2O? S2O seems to be mainly focused on transformation processes of established journals, while Diamond OA seems to be a more sustainable model, especially for newly founded journals.

AR: Diamond OA seems like a superior model compared to S2O because there is no conditionality attached to the OA publication. However its perennity is just as uncertain as it relies on funding for example from societies or institutions, which have their own financial constraints. If S2O "fails", a journal can go back behind the paywall. If Diamond OA fails, the perennity of the journal may be at stake.

RG: I see them as complementary and equally valid, rather than viewing one as superior to the other.

Q. I am concerned about a recent trend that I'm noticing with publishers seemingly merging S2O and R&P models... but still calling their models S2O. I think this confuses the space. I understand the need to test various models but let's be clear in our language. I would like to know if the speakers and others are also noticing this trend and what their thoughts are on this?

AR: I personally don't agree that maintaining pre-existing R&P agreements alongside pure subscriptions is incompatible with S2O. Such a mix of income streams still achieves 100% OA without APCs, simply by maintaining existing relationships and contracts. Conversely, achieving 100% only with R&P is not realistic, and not feasible for smaller journals/publishers.

RG: Agree. This is an issue that is being taken up by the S2O Community of Practice. The group recognizes the need for a clear definition of S2O.

Q. Do speakers believe that success in S2O is field-dependent, or do they see consistent patterns across different fields?

AR: In our experience, S2O has been most successful in the mathematics field, it is well understood and supported by this community which traditionally does not favour gold OA but rather green OA.

RG: S2O has been applied successfully across many disciplines. It is especially appealing in HSS fields where there is no established OA business model. In natural sciences fields, APCs and R&P have been effective, although S2O has some benefits over these approaches.

Q. Was the Muse royalty guarantee supported with funding by Mellon, if goals weren't achieved?

WQ: No, Mellon supported a feasibility analysis. The royalty guarantee is secured by MUSE.

Q. S2O is definitely cost-neutral. I was wondering, when you meet your colleagues in publishing who do not offer cost-neutral OA models, are there ever back and forth conversations where one tries to convince the other that their model is better? If so, is there any common ground between yourselves and more purely commercial publishers?

AR: Many such conversations are public!

RG: Yes, much back and forth, which is really helpful. It isn't non-profits versus commercial, several of the publishers driving S2O are mission-oriented commercial publishers.

Q. How can society journals effectively implement the S2O model to balance open access goals with financial sustainability, while maintaining value for both society members and institutional subscribers?

RG: S2O can maintain income from subscriptions while converting all of the content of the publication to OA. This is in the interests of society members as readers and as authors - no fees. Of course, S2O does not replace other sources of revenue, and that can be a sticking point that needs to be addressed.

Q. Can Anne explain more specifically how the cooperation on S2O with other societies/publishers works?

AR: We have started a cooperation between three maths S2O publishers: EDP Sciences/SMAI, EMS Press and MSP. We each (MSP/EDP-SMAI/EMS) have a shared understanding page "Open maths through S2O": <https://ems.press/open-mathematics-through-subscribe-to-open>, <https://www.edpsciences.org/en/open-math-through-s2o> and https://msp.org/publications/s2o_math/. We are hoping to expand this cooperation in the future.

Q. How does S2O impact the author agreement, if at all? Does transferred copyright remain with the publisher even when the licence is changed to a cc-by (or similar). Or can S2O mean free to read only with some publishers?

AR: In our case (EDP Sciences), articles published OA under S2O are published under a CC-BY licence, with copyright remaining with the author.

RG: Based on Annual Reviews' policy, authors retain copyright and the right to use their work for non-commercial purposes, while granting Annual Reviews an exclusive licence for publication and distribution rights. If an S2O article is designated as open access with a CC-BY licence, readers and authors gain certain usage rights (e.g., reuse, redistribution with attribution), but this change to a CC BY licence doesn't affect the underlying copyright arrangement. The publisher retains its exclusive right to publish, even under S2O, which means S2O articles remain under the publisher's distribution control.

Q. Librarians continue to be interested in usage of Read. With funding OA, including S2O, we are now also interested in use of Publish by the HEI's own researcher community. Collecting author affiliation is a data point which we need. Can publishers make this easily available?

AR: At the moment we don't have an automated process to report on read and publish usage to subscribing institutions. Such reports are compiled manually and provided to subscribing institutions on request.

ML: I speculate that reporting on affiliated-author 'publish activity' could become more common if/where S2O publishers offer an OA-publishing guarantee to subscribing libraries - i.e. when authors affiliated at institutions that are paying towards S2O can continue to publish open access even if the funding threshold for opening the whole volume of the journal is not met. In any OA model, tracking affiliated-author 'publish' data commonly involves a focus on corresponding authors only. Data on publish activity from ALL affiliated authors is more complex (and far less standard) to collect and report, but is a richer set of information. We should remember that not all scholars have higher-educational institutional affiliations to read or publish OA. The S2O model already addresses this, and enables OA publishing for all scholars. So, perhaps tracking 'publish' activity in general, and more broadly (e.g. also looking at countries or cities, and other data), could inform whether a larger diversity of authors are publishing in S2O-enabled OA titles. This sort of reporting is demanding, and will remain highly resource intensive until infrastructure, metadata collection and publishing workflows evolve.

Q. Do S2O journals have a limit on publication numbers; is this the same compared to a subscribe model, or is this increased/decreased under the S2O model?

ER: Our S2O journals don't have a limit on publication numbers. For our astronomy title, the competitor journals moved to Gold OA in 2023 and 2024. Subsequently there was a large influx of submissions to our title in 2024. As the rejection rate was not increased, this has led to a significant increase in the number of articles published in 2024 (+40%). This has led to higher publication costs, which is challenging under S2O.

RG: All Annual Reviews content is commissioned. Moving to S2O has not impacted the number of articles published.

Q. 1. Did any of the participating journals in S2O have secondary revenue sources such as reprints, advertising? If yes, were those revenue streams lost on moving to S2O?

2. What happens to backfiles revenue of the journals that move to S2O? Do you continue selling backfiles separately?

3. Several publishers have not met their targets for S2O and yet made their journal open. Have you faced this? In this case, how have you dealt with it? Did you face a pushback from those that committed to S2O?

AR: 1. No secondary revenue sources such as reprints and advertising in our case. See our Transparency Reports for a full picture of revenue sources for our maths journals.

https://www.edpsciences.org/en/subscribe-to-open-s2o#anchor_transparency

2. No significant backfiles sales in our case. However for some of our journals, the backfiles are remaining behind a paywall as a reserved benefit for subscribers.

3. Yes we have faced the case of not meeting targets for S2O but making the journal open. In this case, we have sought complementary funding, from the society owner or from grants.

RG: 1. Revenue from copyright payments has seen a gradual decline since we started S2O-supported OA publishing. We don't run advertising, but in theory ad revenue should rise because of additional journal usage. 2. Yes, we continue to offer backfiles - S2O converts content to OA going forward, our backfiles are not all open. 3. We have not experienced this.

Q. Do you really think S2O is sustainable and a legitimate long term solution for OA?

RG: That's a high bar, there are so many variables in publishing at the moment it is impossible to say what will work in the long term. I will say that S2O has us in a stronger position than paywalled publishing and in my view it is at least as robust as APCs and R&P approaches.

ML: As another attendee commented, the sustainability of all/any models are in question, especially considering ongoing levels of unbundling and subscription cancellations. Also, as we learnt in the session, S2O is evolving; the Community of Practice is open to suggestions and keen to iterate in order to continue to deliver OA publishing that is more inclusive for all readers and authors across the globe.

Comment: When we evaluate any of our library subscriptions, we do look at usage stats. At my institution we intentionally exclude the OA titles from our analysis, so we use TR_J1 reports in evaluation as opposed to TR_J3. For these titles published under S2O we should actually look at controlled and OA journal use. I would recommend all S2O publishers to bring to their customers' attention the fact that OA usage and TR_J3 is the better report to use in S2O model titles' evaluation. Right now librarians may not even notice that a title or a product switched to S2O and evaluation should use different metrics than a regular subscription.

AR: This is a good point, we have started communicating about the "proper" use of COUNTER reports in the case of S2O.

Q. If publishers don't get the threshold funding, could they reduce the numbers of OA articles, instead of putting the entire journal issue behind a paywall? It is more logical and still follows the principle of S2O (just not as much).

AR: We are following with interest the experiments of publishers proposing an "OA guarantee": free OA publication for authors of subscribing institutions in case the journal does not meet its funding target to publish 100% OA.

WQ: An interesting thought, but it muddies the water and everyone is seeking clarity. Also, how would decisions on what to make open be made?

ML: As Anne has touched on already, a way to handle this is to continue to publish OA only those articles from authors affiliated with paying/subscribing institutions. This is a new development / adaptation offered by some S2O publishers. Other ways for S2O to evolve may emerge. As Wendy says, clarity around the OA offering is very important.

Q. What do you think of ASM's approach to collecting page charges from authors under S2O? Isn't this just APC under a different name, what undermines the intention of S2O?

AR: Our astronomy title continues to collect page charges from authors not affiliated with member institutions, as it did prior to S2O. Member countries directly sponsor the journal, so authors from these countries do not pay page charges. Sponsorship and page charges fund editorial costs. Subscriptions fund publication costs. Again, this situation pre-dated the OA transition. Page charges are not APCs, but the existence of page charges certainly creates difficulties in communicating about S2O for this title.

WQ: Given the many commendable trials of the S2O approach, we now need an agreed set of factors that define S2O. This is being taken up by the Community of Practice.

Q. Are there S2O titles that had to be closed again or returned to the paywalled state?

ML: These answers were shared by attendees in chat (and were not supplied by those on the panel): Karger launched its S2O program in 2022, but found that while the 2023 editions of two journals met their subscription targets for OA, only one did in 2024 – as a result, content from the 2024 editions are not open for both journals. Karger isn't the only publisher which has had to switch in and out of the S2O model: Duke University Press plans to use the S2O model in 2025 although it did not meet the funding threshold to make the 2024 volume of its Demography journal fully open access. Reverse flip' is not specific to the S2O model, it happens also to APC or different Diamond models - see <https://www.mdpi.com/2304-6775/7/2/23>

Q. If the threshold is not reached, shouldn't libraries that contributed get the "normal" subscription access?

AR: They do.

WQ: From the MUSE perspective, if we are under supported, those who supported will access under a traditional subscription model.

RG: Same for Annual Reviews, plus Green OA

Q. Why do you believe that open access, when managed by for-profit commercial publishers, will not prioritize their financial gains over the research funded by taxpayer money? Considering the significant benefits and revenues generated by commercial editors from research typically conducted by researchers and volunteers, do you think this model is once again a business model and how do you see that is more sustainable and fair? I think transparency is very important, and publishing should be community-driven. Additionally, with the current model based on Article Processing Charges (APCs), there seems to be a lack of transparency regarding fixed fees and ethical concerns, including the prevalence of retracted articles due to the pay-to-publish approach. How do you view these issues in the context of open access publishing?

AR: The fact that S2O originated and was initially adopted by either not-for-profit, or at least small/medium publishers, is an indicator that the motivation is not to increase financial gains, but rather an attempt to achieve full OA with "the money that is already in the system." With S2O, there is no volume incentive, therefore less ethical concerns. I agree that transparency is a very important aspect of S2O.

RG: S2O publishers include societies, non-profits and for-profit entities. All of them are committed to transparency which, as you say, is key.

Comment: You keep talking about libraries to keep subscribing in an S2O for the greater good. While most libraries will subscribe to an S2O at a certain point we may just not be able to afford a subscription at some point (especially in Canada we are dealing with the USD fluctuation). Should libraries really be putting S2O subscriptions above regular subscriptions and ignoring usage or department input just to keep contributing to the "greater good?" I just don't see how this long term is going to work with the lack of funding for libraries and the difficult budget decisions we already need to make.

AR: S2O is a conditional OA model. In theory, libraries do not subscribe for the "greater good", but out of self-interest, to secure continued access to the content for their members. As a bonus, if revenue targets are met, they contribute to the open access publication.

RG: Librarians must balance multiple factors when allocating their subscription budgets. Equitable open access via S2O is one consideration. How it ranks alongside others, such as usage, quality of publication, cost, etc., is for the library staff to decide. We are not asking for a free pass just because we use S2O, happy to be judged on the value of our output in the round.

Q. How can we engage Coalition S to put some money up to show support? But if funded by these types of orgs instead of publishers, does this hybridize S2O as a Diamond model? How does the panel differentiate Diamond and S2O?

AR: It would be good to find a mechanism to financially support S2O or Diamond OA models - and probably cheaper than funding APCs!

RG: Integrating direct funding (Diamond) with library support (S2O) may be the most powerful route to a sustainable OA future. Easy to say, not so easy to implement, but I'd love to see discussions on this.

Q. Can S2O work for small independent social science journals?

AR: Yes, why not, as long as there is an existing subscriber basis

WQ: The model works for a single title as well as multiple.

RG: I'd say that's the S2O sweet spot!

Q. I may misunderstand: is the S2O model actually dependent on additional income streams from govt, etc? If yes, then those are certainly at risk of disrupting the model.

AR: In theory S2O is not dependent on additional income streams. In our case we acknowledge additional financial support from e.g. the French govt. Such grants are meant to perennialize the OA transition under S2O. They can fund things like much needed communication and promotion of the S2O model.

RG: At least in the case of Annual Reviews, S2O is dependent only on subscriptions. It is rare but not completely unknown for some of our subscriptions to be paid by a government agency. I don't see it as a major risk to us at the moment.

Q. A friend of mine worked in charity fundraising and they re-focused their efforts towards the private sector, who have Corporate Social Responsibility obligations and budgets. That got me thinking how to leverage that. Don't have an answer yet and wonder whether there's 'tacit' ethical resistance to private funding of S2O... or Diamond OA in our case

AR: Good idea!

WQ: No objection from me. Good idea!

ML: Thank you for this point. When considering the evolution of pure or fully OA models, we all too often ignore the funding and participation of corporations, private organisations and non-higher-education R&D. We may not even have to look as far as Corporate Social Responsibility budgets (although that is an interesting idea!). Private companies have paid (and are paying) large sums for paywalled content, for permissions, for licensing and reprints. This is all funding that otherwise could be supporting inclusive OA publishing, but is currently used to sustain legacy, closed models of publishing. S2O is one way for funds from libraries of private research organisations and corporations to be redirected in support of OA models. There aren't any examples of diamond OA publishing that I personally know of that rely on private / corporate funding; editorial independence of the publisher will be particularly important in any such cases.

Q. What is/how do you envisage the role of funders in an S2O world?

WQ: Ah, that is the question. If (some) funder support was transferred from APCs to Diamond/S2O, it would be a huge boost to equitable OA. Not straightforward to do so, however.

Q. What is key to encourage/persuade new subscribers in S2O?

AR: One approach is showing how much they save by paying for a subscription that can be a fraction of the APCs they would pay if the journal was Gold open access. But it is arguably even more difficult to attract new subscribers than convince existing subscribers to renew their subscription.

RG: Enlightened self-interest. In Annual Reviews' case, if a non subscribing institution has high usage for one or two titles, they could help secure the future by subscribing to those and still getting access to the other 49 titles without payment. Small outlay, big(ger) return.

Here are some questions about S2O submitted by registrants before the event - they were not covered in the live discussion:

Q. Does S2O work for books / longform publications, and can it also work for journals from LMICs?

WQ: There are equivalents to S2O in book publishing, e.g., [D2O](#). I think that S2O could work for journals from LMICs, and we would welcome anyone considering this to join the Community of Practice.

ML: You can also hear more about MIT press' D2O approach here in OASPA's [previous wayfinders session](#). Collective action is a model for several book publishers, and OASPA hopes to have a future wayfinders session that delves deeper into this topic. S2O (or other collective action models) could be a model that works in the case of journals in any country. Having an established, pre-existing base of paying subscribers can be a very helpful starting point if using the S2O model. However, the principles of collective action (which are the basis of S2O) could, at least in theory, be applied to any title in general. OA publishing is highly contextualised and OASPA would like to hear directly from publishers across the world what they think would work in their contexts, and why.

Q. How does data (open data) fit into the S2O model?

WQ: OA (including S2O) and Open Data are inseparable partners to achieving Open Science.

Q. Who does the S2O model advantage, and equally, who is disadvantaged by this approach?

WQ: No cost to publish, no cost to read should be the target for OA. This treats all fields and all parts of the world equally, and doesn't disadvantage anyone.

Q. What is the biggest blocker to more paywalled journal content not moving to OA via S2O?

WQ: Not all income is from subscription income, and if the non-subscription income can't be retained under S2O it is major barrier to implementation. Also, some (big) publishers may feel that it restricts their profit potential.

Q. Are S2O publishers seeing (and are they looking for) growth, new business, new launches? OR is S2O looking to persuade a certain threshold minimum number of institutions to subscribe in advance, so others can access and publish OA without charges?

AR: At the moment EDP sciences is seeking stability and sustainability for the OA transition of our existing journals under S2O. Maybe if in the future S2O becomes a mainstream model, we could imagine growth, new launches...

WQ: We are currently planning to use S2O to support a new product.