



# FROM FRENEMIES TO TRUSTED PARTNERS: Q&A

The now widespread recognition of the benefits of open access (OA) to research and scholarship has brought the global system of scholarly publishing to a historic turning point, as well as an impasse as the key stakeholders differ on how best to achieve the goal of universal OA. The debate in scholarly communications since the announcement of Plan S, OA 2020, numerous negotiated “transformative agreements,” and the (rumored) forthcoming White House Executive Order has left both publishers and libraries scrambling to find sustainable and affordable paths forward.

In these turbulent times, more than ever, libraries and publishers need to work together. And not just talk about working together. This was discussed during a LIBER 2020 Online session, From Frenemies to Trusted Partners<sup>1</sup>. Since it was not possible to answer all questions during the discussion which followed, two speakers kindly took the time to answer questions offline. Their insights are presented in this document.

## **Questions Answered by Richard Gallagher, President & Editor-in-Chief, Annual Reviews, and Sara Rouhi, Director of Strategic Partnerships, PLOS**

*In launching Subscribe to Open, being a collective action model, what have been the biggest challenges in the execution of the model? How have the libraries embraced this model?*

**Richard Gallagher:** As the success of Subscribe to Open (S2O) depends on retaining subscribers, the biggest challenge is to engage every one of them. Consortia managers were a great help in doing this. The librarians were prepared to engage and examine the proposal with an open mind. The outcome has been enthusiastic support and, although S2O is still in the pilot phase, it feels like trusted partnerships have been established.

*In terms of transparency on transformation of hybrid journals/publishers, do you feel they are better than subscription models or not?*

**Sara Rouhi:** I think the challenges with hybrid journals/publishers re: transparency relate to the “black box” represented by subscription pricing. As subscription pricing is so often linked way back to print subscriptions (or other anachronous metrics), it’s hard to understand what those prices represent, what costs they cover, etc. When you add the hybrid/APC journals to that mix, the costs relating to those OA efforts get mixed/tangled



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<sup>1</sup> <https://youtu.be/8Pmzvpvhs0>



with the subscription costs and it's hard to untangle them. So by definition it's harder to make them transparent. It's telling, though, that many hybrid publishers can so deeply discount their APCs. It tells quite a bit about how much margin there is and the benefits of subscriptions in cushioning costs for OA publishing.

**Richard Gallagher:** The level of transparency depends on the commitment/comfort level of the publisher to being open. It is a question of how you conduct business, rather than the publishing model you are pursuing, in my opinion. As Sara notes, transparency is not necessarily straight-forward, there are many issues to untangle, but it is essential to a more equitable and cost-effective publishing ecosystem.

*What practical steps can be taken to avoid the large commercial publishers taking all the money in the system?*

**Sara Rouhi:** Prioritizing partnerships with native-OA publishers, non-profits, and society publishers! It's natural to want to cover the "big deals" first since they represent the majority of what libraries spend and what authors read/publish but that choice automatically leaves "crumbs" for everyone else. Big kudos to libraries that are able to strategically prioritize smaller agreements with more "at risk" publishers. That's the only way to ensure we maintain the diversity in the publishing ecosystem that libraries, researchers, and institutions value.

**Richard Gallagher:** I agree with Sara's comments. Supporting smaller, high quality, innovative publishers is vital to maintaining diversity in publishing, but support should be earned, not given. Both for-profit or non-profit organizations are worthy of consideration, but there is always a possibility that outstanding for-profits will be bought by the commercial giants, contributing further to the oligopoly.

*What thoughts – specific thoughts – do any of you have for humanities scholars in the U.S., who typically are NOT recipients of government funding and who are by and large incapable of sustaining the APC model? This in a world where "Annual Review" is not a publisher but a place where publications are being tallied, thereby forcing scholars both to find the time and money to do research and THEN the money to "get it out there."*

**Sara Rouhi:** This really gets back to the question of new business models that do not rely on authors to manage the payment process and/or provide funds themselves. APCs are exclusionary - that's a fact. Social sciences and humanities are always going to be at a disadvantage in a publishing paradigm that asks authors to bear publishing costs. There are some fantastic, non-APC based models in the humanities - Open Library of the Humanities (OLH) comes to mind. Again, libraries need to prioritize the business models and publishers they support to ensure that ALL their researchers are supported, not just those with access to large grants.

**Richard Gallagher:** I agree, OLH is a beacon. S2O is also a good approach for humanities journals to convert to OA, assuming that publishers are surviving on existing revenues, and Berghahn Open Anthro is pioneering this.

*Is there anything wrong with being a commercial publisher? I guess the question is in their primary objectives or the way of conducting business, rather than being commercial or not. Being commercial is not a fault I would assume.*

**Sara Rouhi:** There's no inherent problem with commercial publishers – it's more a question of what motivates business decisions. There are great for-profit solutions



providers in our space – Digital Science comes to mind – whose mission and efforts are very aligned with libraries and non-profits. That said, when shareholders or private equity are driving how revenue targets are set, priorities naturally shift.

**Richard Gallagher:** Nothing wrong with being a commercial publisher at all (I launched one at one point in my career and have worked for two big ones). To me, the problem is that a handful of big publishers control too large a fraction of the market (in fact, not all of these are commercial publishers). Given their importance, these big companies have a profound impact on the system. Much of their impact is positive; however, in my view, they now exert too much control, extract too much as profit, and fall well short in terms of transparency. And things are getting worse.

*When considering new models not based on APCs, how do publishers meet the Plan S requirement on waivers for low-income economies? Have you discussed that with cOAlition S?*

**Sara Rouhi:** At PLOS, we have always had and will continue to have a robust set of waiver programs. The PLOS Global Participation Initiative (GPI) provides fee assistance to authors whose research is funded primarily (50% or more of the work contained within the article) by an institution or organization from eligible low- and middle-income countries. The PLOS Publication Fee Assistance (PFA) program is intended for authors unable to pay all or part of their publication fees – irrespective of their geographic location – and who can demonstrate financial need.

For our collective action for PLOS Medicine and PLOS Biology, we will be making all Research 4 Life countries automatic members to the collective without needing to pay a fee. With these three programs we are confident that we are meeting the needs of authors who cannot pay APCs but we need to do more. The fact is that requests for waivers only go up and we are not able to offer as much assistance as we'd like.

**Richard Gallagher:** Our model for OA, Subscribe to Open, depends on institutional librarians continuing to pay a subscription fee to provide access for their researchers, faculty and students. The published content is open to everyone, no author fee or end-user fee is levied, with the wealthy countries supporting access to the low-income countries.

*How about securing transparency not only of publishing costs but also on investments (e.g. towards fully reproducible papers)?*

**Sara Rouhi:** The nice thing about working at non-profit publisher is that our finances are publicly available. It would be really interesting to see RAP/PAR and other transformative deals (or even renegotiations of subscription agreements) negotiating requirements for transparency in the agreements themselves. I'm sure this is being done and look forward to seeing more of it.

*The Academy left the field to commercial publishers because of the increasing the cost of publishing and delivering. Why don't they return to the field again with OA publishing? Like Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard University, etc. Is this a utopic idea?*

**Sara Rouhi:** This is a great point and why it's really important for campuses to support their university presses. The recent comments by Tony Sanfilippo, Director of The Ohio State University Press, re: the recent OSU/T&F agreements were unfortunate to see. Their clearly wasn't alignment there and so the OSU agreement seemed to advantage a



commercial publisher over their in-house university press. Ideally the library and consortia negotiating teams are fully engaged with their presses as they undertake these agreements. (See the LIBLICENSE thread titled "The Ohio State University and Taylor & Francis announce a new read and publish agreement")

*We are mainly talking OA journals for advanced scientists it seems: any developments towards early career researchers or OA student led journals? #curious.*

*Or developments towards smaller scientific communities?*

**Sara Rouhi:** There are a lot of efforts in this space. Library Publishing Coalition, university presses, and outfits like OLH are leading the charge in allowing for niche OA journals that are very targeted in terms of their communities – be they early career or smaller communities.

There are legal concerns regarding the legal decision of adding the "publishing" component to the existing "reading (subscription)" component, some arguing that the publishing service shouldn't be considered an extension of "subscriptions" and leave behind the public procurement processes that could decide which publishing service is suiting better for the buying organization. Thoughts?

**Sara Rouhi:** While I understand the thinking here – and we saw an extensive discussion of this in the last six months with respect to agreements in Europe – I think it's very hard to make this case. Publishing organizations are not interchangeable in the way a library platform or CRIS system is. Publishers – particularly non-profit and society publishers – work for and with very specific communities, offer varying levels of service and support, and reach/target specific audiences. To reduce a publisher to a service for a price ignores those nuances and would generate a LOT of pushback from specific research communities. Unfortunately, another unintended consequence of pursuing a public procurement route is reduced diversity in the publishing ecosystem. Non-profits and societies would likely be pushed out because they cannot offer the depth of discounts, services, and scale that larger commercial publishers can.

*Aside from transformative agreements (aka new Big Deals), what sort of leverage do you see libraries being able to exert with our budgets. Do you see library influence/leverage being different for read vs. publish libraries?*

**Sara Rouhi:** Libraries have ALL the leverage! Talk/walk with your dollars! Cancel/renege agreements that do not align with your expectation around transparency, open scholarship, inclusion and equity. We are in a unique moment where publishers are pressured to meet aggressive mandates from funders and all stakeholders in the scholarly community are crunched re: budgets. NOW is the time to aggressively negotiate for the norms/standards you expect as you have to be even more selective with your budget dollars. Be brave!

*How do you see the relationship between OA and open infrastructure? How do we make sure that in five years, we are not locked into proprietary infrastructure the way we were locked into proprietary access for such a long time?*

**Sara Rouhi:** This is such an important question and one that will be driven by where libraries invest their limited dollars during this unique moment in scholarly publishing and in the world. COVID, economic and social unrest, black lives matter -- all of these issues are asking individuals and organizations to think deeply about their priorities. Is business



as usual good enough anymore? Is saving money for YOUR individual institution in a big deal that further cements the commercial power of a small group worth the downstream consequences? These are tough questions.

**Richard Gallagher:** Good question. There is a clear need for open infrastructure. For a small publisher such as Annual Reviews, it needs to be a turnkey service at a competitive price, and I am not sure that has been achieved yet. This is one (of several) areas where the many small non-profit publishers could work together to create an effective and efficient service, but such collaborations have been slow to emerge.