



Plan S consultation on Transformative Journals: Response from the Society Publishers' Coalition

Background

cOAlition S have released [new guidance](#) about a new initiative labelled “transformative journals”. This addendum to the original Plan S guidance outlines nine criteria that journals should meet to be classified as transformative:

1. A Transformative Journal will need to demonstrate an annual increase in the Open Access penetration rate of at least 8 percent points year-on-year, and either:
 - a. commit to transition to full Open Access at the latest when the Open Access penetration rate has passed 50%, or
 - b. commit to transition to full Open Access by an agreed timeline and at the latest on the 31 December 2024.
2. The Transformative Journal must make all Open Access content available in accordance with the Plan S requirements.
3. The Transformative Journal must demonstrate transparent pricing, including a breakdown of prices based on the services it provides.
4. The Transformative Journal must adopt mechanisms to avoid undue publication barriers, by offering waivers and discounts to authors in line Plan S Guidance.
5. The Transformative Journal must implement transparent pricing for the remaining subscription content, ensuring that institutions purchasing a subscription to a transformative journal will pay only for remaining subscription content, and not for Open Access (OA) articles paid for either directly by APCs or through any other means (e.g. Read and Publish / Publish and Read deals).
6. The Transformative Journal must agree to at least overall cost neutrality over the course of its global transition to a fully Open Access business model.
7. The Transformative Journal should regularly update its authors on the usage, citations, and online attention of their published articles.

8. The publisher of the Transformative Journal must provide an annual public report to cOAlition S to measure progress and demonstrate compliance with the requirements for Transformative Journals and to report on the Open Access article usage, citations and cost per download compared with the subscription content published in the transformative journal.

9. A publisher who wishes to qualify for having journals acknowledged as transformative journals by cOAlition S should clearly and publicly announce its commitment to gradually transition all the journals it owns, as well as the maximum number of the other journals they publish, to full and immediate Open Access publication of all primary research.

We were invited to provide feedback on the framework. The SocPC submitted the following response on Monday 6 January 2020, based on the survey provided by cOAlition S.

cOAlition S feedback survey

About you

Are you responding as an individual or on behalf of an organisation?

Organisation

If organisation, on behalf of what kind of organisation are you responding?

Other (Society Publishers' Coalition)

Transformative journals – overall views

“Transformative journals” are journals where the share of Open Access content is gradually increased, where subscription costs are offset by income from payments for publishing services (to avoid double payments), and where the journal has a clear commitment to transition to full Open Access in an agreed timeframe. They also meet the other requirements of Plan S. To what extent do you agree with the statement: "in principle, transformative journals can be a useful and viable route to full and immediate OA"?

Agree

To what extent do you agree with the statement: "the draft framework provides a viable route by which publishers could implement a publishing option in line with the Plan S principles"?

Disagree

The draft framework specifies that a Transformative Journal must demonstrate an annual increase in the OA penetration rate of at least eight percentage points year-on-year, measured on a three year rolling period. To what extent do you agree that this is fair and achievable?

Disagree

If you disagree that this is fair and reasonable, then please specify what target you would support, and why. [2000 character limit]

OA article numbers are driven by the prevalence of author, institution & funder mandates around the globe and the availability of funding to support those mandates. Much of the growth in OA derives from authors in well-funded institutions, while much of the overall growth in article output is from authors in countries like China, India and Brazil. Moreover, there are large areas of research in American and European institutions that are carried out with little or no funding, and certainly no funding to cover publication/APC costs to support OA. Unless Plan S-style policies (and appropriate funding) become commonplace globally, journals will be unlikely to generate 8% growth in OA per year. Hybrid journals can (and do) encourage OA but do not ultimately control uptake. We are therefore unable to identify a suitable mechanism that would allow us to guarantee compliance with such a growth target. It has been suggested that journals should consider rejecting articles from authors who wish to publish their articles behind a paywall; this breaches the concept of editorial independence and - by discriminating against unfunded authors and those from poorer nations - would be unethical.

In addition to the 8% increase on OA penetration, year-on-year, the publishers of Transformative Journals must agree to either flip them to OA either when 50% of the content is OA, or by 31st December 2024. To what extent do you agree that these are fair and achievable?

Disagree

If you disagree with this, please specify what target (percentage of OA, or date) you would support, and why. [2000 character limit]

The ability to flip a hybrid journal to OA depends on many factors, including the global OA policy landscape, funding availability, subject coverage, authorship demographics and others. Hybrid journals are making progress to OA (increasing their OA uptake) at very different rates. Thus having a fixed date by which all journals must have flipped is not realistic.

The idea of a % threshold is - in principle - much more sensible. However, determining exactly what that percentage should be is difficult as the threshold will depend on the journal. 50% may be viable for some journals, but not all (e.g. fields where a minority of research is grant funded). Hybrid journals have well-established author communities and - even in pro-OA fields such as molecular biology - a majority of the authorship base in long-standing titles is unused to the APC requirement. Flipping in a fair way depends on funding being available for all authors, not just those funded by signatories to Plan S. Where only a minority of research is grant-funded (e.g., in much of AHSS, mathematics and some medical fields), and in cases where most submissions are from authors whose institutions do not have OA funding available, flipping a journal at 50% would exclude large numbers of authors without applying a level of waivers that would make the journal unsustainable.

Final comments

If you have any further comments on the proposed framework for Transformative Journals, please add them here. [2000 character limit]

We are pleased that cOAlition S has engaged with the community and expanded the available mechanisms for Plan S compliance and we support - in principle - the concept of transformative journals. However, the framework as currently written is not workable.

The success of any transition to an OA world requires long-term commitments on library funding for non-subscription models and/or rewiring existing subscription spend in favour of OA. This requires 'buy-in' not only from libraries but also senior staff at universities and institutions around the world. Without that, there is limited incentive (and considerable risk) for any publisher – let alone a not-for-profit, society publisher – to commit to a flip.

SocPC shares the ambition of cOAlition S to see a global and sustainable transition to OA, but it is essential that this transition is carefully considered and planned, that it harnesses prevailing market dynamics and treats all authors equitably.