

# A refreshed agenda and the 'open' road



**Malavika Legge**  
(Biochemical Society)

This article announces the Biochemical Society and Portland Press' joint commitment to commencing a sustainable and equitable transition to open access and describes early steps on our road to a more 'open' ethos. The paywall conundrum is explored as part of this, and Portland Press' first steps towards transformative models are described.

The Biochemical Society was established in 1911, during the early origins of molecular biology, and it is the largest UK-based single-discipline learned society in the biosciences.

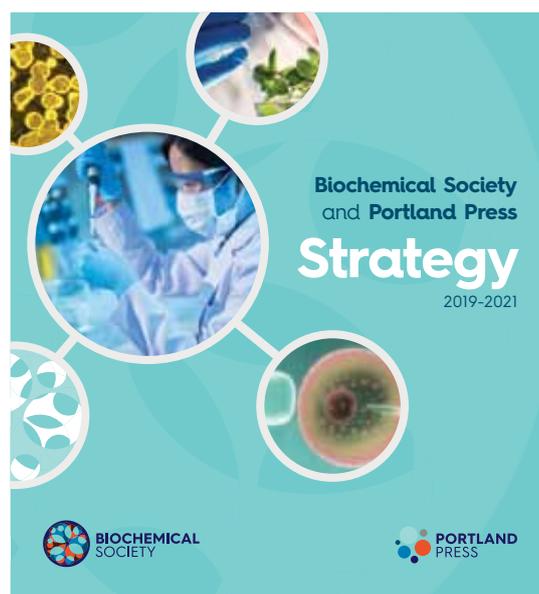
The most recent Annual General Meeting of the Society on 25 July 2019 saw the launch of a revised strategy for the period 2019 to 2021. This refreshed agenda covers both Biochemical Society activities and those of its wholly-owned publisher, Portland Press under the headline themes outlined in Box 1.

## Box 1. Overarching themes of the Biochemical Society Strategy—summer 2019 to end 2021

- Bring together molecular bioscientists
- Support career development and lifelong learning
- Encourage wider dialogue and work collaboratively across and beyond our community
- Promote and share knowledge
- Promote the importance of our discipline and, through this, the broader life sciences
- Ensure sustainable support for the advancement of science

During a period of considerable change in the political, scholarly publishing and research funding landscapes, with issues ranging from Brexit to [Plan S](#), the Biochemical Society's goal is to ensure we can continue to fulfil our mission in a rapidly changing world. The relationship between the Society and Portland Press is important, not only due to the income Portland Press generates to support the Society's charitable objectives, but also because publishing activity provides a crucial mechanism through which the Society fulfils its mission-led activities of disseminating knowledge, bringing together bioscientists and sharing scientific research.

*...the Biochemical Society's goal is to ensure we can continue to fulfil our mission in a rapidly changing world.*



A key strand within the strategy, and one that touches *all* the overarching themes is commencing a transition to a more open ethos.

### Fostering openness; identifying barriers

Our aim is to support the dissemination and advancement of science, delivering opportunities to share knowledge and expertise, to critically discuss ideas and provide forums in which to collaborate.

The advantage of the Society owning not just journals but also its own publishing subsidiary, is that publishing policy and sales practices of Portland Press can be governed by the Society's mission and objectives. In turn, in addition to gifting all its surplus back to the Society, Portland Press is key to the Society influencing and driving positive change in the areas of scholarly research communication and the publication of peer-reviewed content.

Research is a global endeavor and its effect is international: publication of validated, peer-reviewed research findings is an in-built part of the research

endeavor, providing a basis for sharing insight, understanding and inspiration. In context of the interconnected and digital world of 2019, paywalls are a barrier to the process of sharing scientific research. That said, sale of journal subscriptions based on paywalled content has long served as the economic model of Portland Press. The subscription model has spread costs across institutional subscribers around the world and contributed substantially to generating annual surpluses that have sustained the Biochemical Society and facilitated its charitable activities.

*...The subscription model has contributed substantially to generating annual surpluses that have sustained the Biochemical Society and facilitated its charitable activities.*

Underlying all published research is data, which has traditionally been kept out of the published domain. This inherited culture represents another barrier to unfettered understanding and reuse of scholarly information. Researchers, publishers, funders and institutions are still finding their way on the path to achieving an appropriate balance with data deposition and publication of data sets.

#### **Evolving policy and practice**

Through the open access and open science movements, the Society recognizes opportunities for less restrictive sharing of scholarly outputs. In the summer of 2017, the Portland Press Board approved the principle of a long-term, sustainable transition to open access, and in April 2018 the Society published its first position statement on open science. In September 2018, cOAlition S was formed, and Plan S was launched.

In context of these internal and external developments, the Society and Portland Press will build on, widen and update our previous open-science position. We will also work closely with researchers, higher education, other learned societies and research funders to effect a sustainable transition to open access. We see this as a stepping stone on the path to open scholarship.

#### **Contending with 'walls'**

As a small, society-owned publisher, Portland Press produces seven journals – six owned by the Biochemical Society and one jointly owned by the Biochemical Society and the Royal Society of Biology. Of these seven titles, two are full open-access journals while the other five are 'hybrid' titles carrying mostly paywalled content and some (~20%) open access content.

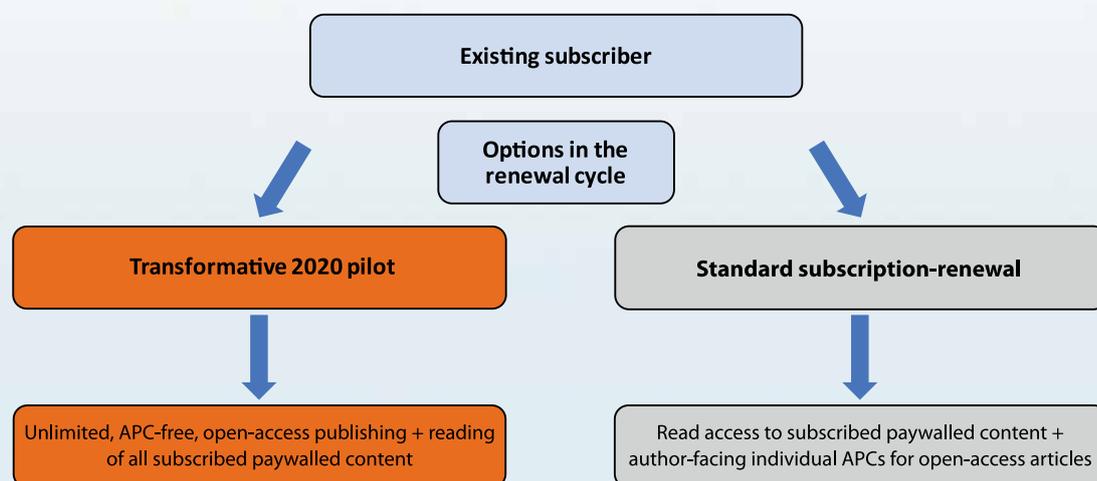
Portland Press receives most of its revenue from institutions that subscribe to the journals (carrying paywalled content) and from the payment of Article Publishing Charges (APCs) to enable open access for individual articles.

While the aims of open scholarship correlate with the Society's objectives to facilitate the sharing of knowledge, the Society can only carry out its charitable work because of income it receives from Portland Press' publishing activities. Over 80% of the Society's income in 2018 was from Portland Press supporting our grant funding, public engagement and educational resources as well as subsidising our scientific meetings. This income has been, and remains, heavily reliant on the legacy subscription model. About 82% of Portland Press' income in 2018 was from subscriptions/paywalled articles. Changes resulting from funder-driven policies and initiatives to promote and accelerate open access will have a significant impact on revenues, surpluses and publishing processes. Despite this and the Society's financial dependence on paywalls, the Society and Portland Press, guided by the overarching mission, are committed to scoping and commencing a *sustainable* transition to open access—sustainable for the Society, and equitable for researchers and institutions based all around the world.

#### **Transforming**

Our first step in transitioning models is to combine the subscription or 'read' element of Portland Press' offering with an open access publishing or 'publish' element under a single, central transformative (Tx) offer for 2020. We will offer these newly crafted, pilot 'Read & Publish' options to 672 subscribing institutions for 2020 as an alternative to renewing their traditional subscription. If an institution takes up the Tx option, in addition to having 'read' access to the paywalled content in the journal, any articles published in 2020 whose corresponding author is based at that institution will be automatically published as open access, without the





requirement to pay an APC. This would flip all papers from individual subscribing institutions to open access in 2020. This would not automatically commit the journals themselves to be completely open access by the end of the year. The intention is that the Society's journals will flip to being fully open access (after an as-yet undefined length of time) because of increasing uptake of our Tx offerings that will translate into increasing quantities of open access articles in the journals.

**More open access, less administration:** The Tx 'Read & Publish' renewal will offer all papers in 2020 from corresponding authors affiliated with subscribing institutions to be published open access automatically. This means that an *uncapped* number of papers from institutions renewing under the Tx offer will be published open access without intervention from the institution OR the authors.

*...Facilitating this APC-free route to open access for a limitless number of papers is a core part of the offering...*

**All you can eat:** Facilitating this APC-free route to open access publishing for a limitless number of papers is a core part of the offering devised to achieve maximum possible open-access content and allow simple administration. This pilot will also extend to our two full-open access journals, therefore allowing APC-free publishing across the entire journal portfolio. On the 'read' side of the offer, online access will be provided to all five of the Biochemical Society's paywalled journals. This makes the Tx renewal for 2020 an 'All You Can Eat' offering.

**A transition:** What is described is an experimental offering and a first step. Alongside this approach Portland Press is also in conversation with some national/regional consortia regarding possible transformative agreements.

*We expect our models to evolve, adapt and change...*



We fully expect our transformative models to evolve, adapt and change in step with feedback, emerging standards for these offerings and the changeable funder-policy landscape.

We have strict pricing policies which means that subscription pricing (or the 'read' component in the new Tx offerings) can only be based on paywalled content. In future years, the expectation is that as the proportion of open access content increases, we start to transition the model away from paywalls.

Supporting open scholarship requires a collaborative and willing community as well as sustainable, long-term efforts. The Tx renewal pilot for 2020 may not appeal to all institutions, but we hope that this offering leads to direct engagement with and feedback from our librarian partners and others. We trust this demonstrates our willingness to change and start to transition away from an outdated business model. We aspire to collaborative development of a transition path that supports researchers and is sustainable and equitable for institutions, funders and the Biochemical Society.

While financial sustainability needs to be carefully considered, we are excited about making scientific research 'open' and chalking out next steps towards open scholarship. This transition will bring the potential for publishing journeys to be further improved and open the door to new thinking around content offerings. This will allow Portland Press to extend the reach of content we publish, and provide greater opportunity for the research and higher-education communities to flourish within the changing culture of science. ■

*...We trust this demonstrates our willingness to transition away from an outdated business model... We aspire to a path that supports researchers and is sustainable and equitable for institutions, funders and the Biochemical Society.*

Please email feedback, thoughts or any questions to [open@biochemistry.org](mailto:open@biochemistry.org)

## Box 2. Jargon-busting

**Open access:** Open access (OA) is a mechanism by which research outputs are distributed online, free of cost or other barriers, and, in its most precise meaning, with the addition of an open license (most commonly for scholarly publishing, a Creative Commons license) that removes most restrictions on use, sharing and reuse. The main focus of the open-access movement is peer-reviewed research literature.

**Open scholarship (and open science as part of this):** As we see it, open scholarship is the name given to a change in the culture of scholarly research, enabled by developing technologies and new opportunities for communication and collaboration. It encompasses topics including open access, open data, metrics, research integrity, research assessment and public engagement. The change in culture resulting from open scholarship affects a range of working practices and all stages of the research cycle, from conceptualization of research through to publication and wider dissemination.

**Full open access:** A journal where all articles are published open access—for Portland Press these titles are currently funded by article publishing charges against each published article (excepting any waivers).

**Hybrid open access:** A journal that publishes content behind a paywall (for subscribers only), but, on request from an author during the publication process, will publish their article open access in return for an article publishing charge/APC. For Portland Press journals, we ensure that subscription pricing is based only on the paywalled content. In addition, we discount APCs for authors based at subscribing institutions.

**cOAlition S and Plan S:** Plan S is an initiative for open access publishing that was launched in September 2018. The plan is supported by cOAlition S, a consortium of research funders. Plan S requires that, from 2021, scientific publications that result from research funded by public grants must be published in compliant open access journals or platforms.

**Transformative:** The initiative for Efficiency and Standards in Article Charges (ESAC) broadly defines transformative agreements as "temporary and transitional" contracts negotiated between institutions and publishers "that transform the business model underlying scholarly journals from subscription to open access". In practice, there is variation in how such agreements are interpreted by funders and other bodies such as cOAlition S and Jisc.