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EDITORIAL

Rogue Publishing, Journal Business Models, and the Future of the Middle Tier

Publish or perish — the imperative for scholars to demonstrate ongoing productivity in terms of articles (and, in some fields, monographs or books) in order to be hired, to be promoted, or sometimes even to keep one's position — has long been a feature of life in universities and research institutes. And while the standards vary slightly across disciplines, institutions, and regions, there is evidence that the pressures have been intensifying. There are many reasons for the trend, some that go well beyond the scope of this editorial. They involve a host of decisions taken over many decades that have led to competition among both individuals and institutions in terms of measurable outputs. The novice academic realizes early on that to never publish or to stop publishing is to jeopardize one's access to external research funding for projects, time away from one's teaching and service obligations to do scholarly work, and advancement opportunities. Many of those reviewing curricula vitae for various purposes have only a vague sense of important ideas and journals in any but their own subfield, so publication counts matter greatly — sometimes critically — while the actual content of the publications can matter little.

Doing research and publishing data and insights from original data, or performing syntheses or analyses of existing data or ideas, is a time-consuming and painstaking task. The academic faces many barriers in doing work of sufficient quality to clear the hurdles of peer review — starting with clearing the time needed to undertake the original fieldwork or intellectual labour and to write and revise a manuscript to submission-ready status with enough lead time to get it into circulation before one's CV or dossier comes under review. The delays in peer review and the uncertainties of the process can be very frustrating.

Is it any wonder that new, profit-making interests have jumped into the breach, "helpfully" offering scholars assistance with finding their place in the literature? Open access is an Internet-era creation whereby the costs of publishing journals are borne by scholars wishing to disseminate their work, rather than by libraries and other subscribers. Publishers of "predatory" or "rogue" journals have taken open access to another level for those willing to pay a fee: guaranteed fast publication, with essentially no peer review, in journals that have names very similar to those of peer-reviewed journals. Expert observers of the predatory journal movement, such as Jeffrey Beall, a librarian at the University of Colorado, provide useful lists of journals and publishers that are walking on the dark side of open access (http://scholarlyoa.com/publishers). Recently the trend has come to the attention of the popular press (see Spears, 2014), but it is unclear whether the general public understands much about the culture of "publish or perish" or the purposes and mechanisms of peer review.

A number of months ago I received a submission that was based on some data collection and analysis conducted in the authors' work setting. The framing of the paper would have needed adjustments to fit with *CJNR*'s mandate and the research approach had some weaknesses that would have required explanation and softening of the conclusions. I provided a fairly extensive list of modifications that we would require before considering it for publication. Recently I heard back from the authors explaining that they had decided to submit to another journal, and a few days later I received a copy of the newly published article. The publisher of the journal in which the article appeared is on Beall's list.

I know that these are well-meaning individuals trying to respond to pressures to publish. So on one level I understand their decision to seek out an open access venue and even to go to the specific journal that they selected. Now the article and their names will be easily pulled up in a Google search and the casual browser of their CVs or of the Internet will conclude that they are published authors who have done research on a topic related to their jobs — even though the work they have published was not well screened or well edited.

Is peer review becoming a luxury, fully present only at the upper end of the publishing gamut? At this end will be the "high impact" journals, where articles are screened by well-resourced editorial offices that can manage the peer-review process with ease. Many authors attempt to publish in these (as both a cause and an effect of being selective and prestigious), but few will have their works chosen. The authors of most articles that appear in high impact journals have the resources, connections, and highly developed skills necessary to identify the topics, approaches, and methods that will be accepted. Access to these articles is highly valued, which in turn demands large subscription fees so that the journals can operate with big budgets.

At the other end of the publishing range will be the crudest forms of open access that verge on vanity publishing, with production costs carried by authors needing exposure and wishing to add lines to their CVs, and with readers left entirely on their own to judge quality. Journals at this lower end will cut costs and time to publication by essentially eliminating screening and editing but, unless things change dramatically, will continue to find paying authors/customers.

And in the middle? In traditional journal publishing, subscription prices that offset production costs are based on perceived value and quality, which are ensured by free editorial expertise, reviewer time, and, of course, content. Open access with some form of review and screening and with expenses covered mainly or exclusively by authors is another area of middle ground. With journals in this category, dependence on scholarly altruism as a means of screening, shaping, and editing content is more challenging, since money passes from author to publisher in a more overt way, for all to see. With external funding agencies increasingly allowing investigators to include publication fees in their budgets and insisting on early open access, and with the most selective journals also being the most prestigious, more and more scholars appear willing to trade money for less scrutiny and less delay to publication.

We cannot pretend any longer that the advancement of knowledge is but one of many motivations in journal publishing. Nor can we pretend that scholarly publishing is free when there are significant undocumented but serious implications of cost shifting to achieve high-quality content. It is time to discuss the underlying problems faced by all of the stakeholders and look at our options not only as institutional leaders but also as publishers, authors, and readers. I for one would be an advocate of putting quality over quantity and greater recognition of high-level and high-quality voluntary contributions to selection and promotion decisions in both mid- and upper-tier journals. The choices we make now are sure to have an influence on which scholarly venues survive in the coming years. Journals that fall between elite ranking and the lower tier of open access may have a very different future from that anticipated by their founders as part of the natural order of things. However, it seems that more discussion would be wise given the wide-ranging consequences for everyone involved.

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