

Anarchy, Commercialism, and “Publish or Perish”

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In recent years, scholars worldwide have found themselves under increasing pressure to publish more, especially in English-language “internationally circulated” journals that are included in globally respected indices such as the ISI Citations. As a result, journals in these networks have been inundated by submissions and many of them accept as few as 10 percent of papers, and in some cases fewer. Given that too few journals or other channels exist to accommodate all the articles written, there has been a proliferation of new publishers offering additional journals in every imaginable field. Complementing the growing demand for new outlets of scholarly work, clever people have understood that new technology has created confusion as well as opportunities and that money can be made in the knowledge communication business.

FAKE AND LOW-QUALITY JOURNALS

Not surprisingly, a large number of “bottom feeders” are now starting “journals” with the sole goal of earning a quick profit and enriching their owners. One of these new journals charges prospective authors a “transaction fee” of US\$500, to be published. Others have alternative ways of exploiting unsophisticated authors. These so-called journals have impressive sounding names and lists of prominent advisory editors—some who have in fact never been asked to serve. Peer reviewing is touted, but one suspects that anyone who pays the fee can get published. Clearly, authors are not served by journals without academic standing and which will not be read nor cited by anyone. Many of these sham journals are in the sciences, with computer science being well represented. The primary problem, of course, is that it is increasingly difficult for potential users to discern respectable journals from the new fakes. A quite useful resource is Jeffrey Beall's *List of Predatory, Open-Access Publishers* (<http://carbon.ucdenver.edu/~jbeall/Beall%27s%20List%20of%20Predatory,%20Open-Access%20Publishers%202012.pdf>). Other options include what may be called pseudo scholarly journals. A prime example is the *Australasian Journal of Bone and Joint Medicine* published by Elsevier, a major multinational publisher. According to the *Scientist* (<http://classic.the-scientist.com/blog/display/55750/>), from 2002–2005 Elsevier was paid by the pharmaceutical company Merck—to publish articles in that journal that were favorable to Merck's drugs Vioxx and Fosamax. Merck's financial involvement in the journal was not disclosed. Elsevier later admitted that it had employed a similar disregard of normal peer-review practice in eight other of its journals, in the early 2000s.

As well as exploitative journals with a primary goal to make money rather than to advance scholarship, a profusion exists of “legitimate” journals, mediocre at best—publishing articles that really should not be published. The major multinational publishers of these journals have assembled large “stables” of them packaged and sold at high prices to libraries. Though many of these periodicals are supposedly peer-reviewed, the standard is frequently low, and much weak research is accepted for publication. Many faculty probably rationalize that being published somewhere is better than not being published at all. A 21st century paradox is that while it is ever more difficult to get published in a top-tier journal, it is now easier than ever to get published.

THE PUBLISH OR PERISH SYNDROME

Surely, the still vibrant “publish or perish” syndrome must bear some of the blame. Universities increasingly demand more publications for promotion, salary increases, or even job security. Further, the pressure has increased to publish in English-language journals, even for scholars in non-English medium academic environments. Far too many academic institutions—a large majority of ones that mainly focus on teaching—insist that their faculty publish. This, their administrators believe, will improve their rankings. Of course, publishers step in to create new journals, which publish these frequently mediocre research articles. Moreover, instead of publishing all their research results in one article, too many authors stretch them out to multiple articles or write repetitively just to increase their publications. Thus, pressure is created on scholars in many fields, who must consult an exponentially increasing number of articles—many of which are

worthless. Administrators are happy that their faculty publish; the publishers are delighted to sell more subscriptions; and the game goes on.

EXPLODING COSTS OF JOURNALS AND KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTS

An excessive number of journals are exorbitantly priced. *Ulrichsweb Global Serials Directory* lists over 141,000 academic and scholarly journals, of which 64,000 are peer-reviewed. Clearly, libraries cannot afford to keep up with such numbers; for a long time, libraries have been canceling journals, due to the ever-escalating cost of serials. For years, the cost of journals has been increasing at a far higher rate than the Consumer Price Index, at a time when library budgets have generally been decreasing. The highest journal costs are invariably in the sciences (the average price of chemistry journals in 2011 was \$4,044, that of physics ones was \$3,499). The cost of some journals are indeed astronomical, for example \$24,048 annually for *Brain Research*, \$20,269 for *Tetrahedron*, and \$17,258 for *Chemical Physics Letters*—all three journals published by Elsevier. John Wiley is another publisher whose journals are frequently extremely expensive. An institutional subscription to Wiley's *Journal of Comparative Neurology* will be \$30,860, in 2012. Though journals in non-hard-science disciplines tend to be substantially cheaper, they are also often subject to high-cost increases. *Library Journal's* 2011 Periodicals Price Survey reveals that journals in language and literature had a 29 percent cost increase from 2009 to 2011. Philosophy and religion were next with a 22 percent increase, followed by agriculture, anthropology, and arts and architecture being tied for third at 17 percent.

Another problem for libraries is the bundling in subscription packages of hundreds of journals that often range widely in quality. With the bundling

model, the library cannot select specific journals and refuse others. Libraries are locked into a deal that often results in the acquisition of poor-quality journals with few readers. Bundling is a practice for publishers to sell journals that few libraries would subscribe to if they were to be selected individually. An additional difficulty is the nondisclosure agreements that some publishers require libraries to sign. These agreements forbid libraries from disclosing the cost and terms of journal package subscriptions.

POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

Is there any solution to this periodicals' crisis? Several strategies spring to mind. Scholars can refuse to serve on editorial boards, submit articles, or act as peer reviewer for journals that are manifestly of poor quality and/or are excessively priced. Those applying for promotion and funding can be limited to submitting, say, five or six seminal publications—the point being that the quality of one's research should count for more than quantity.

Open-access e-journals hold strong promise. Many scholarly organizations and universities have created new open-access journals that are reliably peer-reviewed and are backed by respected scholars. There are over 7,000 free, quality-controlled scholarly journals in the *Directory of Open Access Journals* (doaj.org). Some of these publications have achieved a high level of respectability and acceptance, while, admittedly, others are struggling, and there are no doubt some that are of poor quality and little relevance. It is early in the open-access movement. If successful, this movement can be an important vehicle for eradicating economic barriers to accessing scholarship. Moreover, if universities and scholarly societies, through expanding open access, can wrest

more control of both the production and diffusion of scholarship away from commercial publishers, legitimate and illegitimate, as well as quality control and prices could be placed on a surer footing.

It is undeniable that presently technology and globalization have brought anarchy to the communication of knowledge in academe and have created serious problems for the academic profession, in a time of increased competition. A meaningful solution will take much dialogue and probably significant changes to how scholarship is diffused, as well as, rewarded.