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The problem is not professional publishing, but the publish-or-perish culture

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Abstract

The publication of scientific papers has become increasingly problematic in the last decades. Even if we agree that a renewed model is needed for peer-reviewed scientific publication, we think the problem does not essentially lie in professional publishing –with economic incentives– but in the publish-or-perish culture that dominates the lives of researchers and academics.

Keywords

science publishing; publish-or-perish; peer-review

COMMENTARY

We have read the opinion piece published in Science and Engineering Ethics under the title "A new science publishing system for a budding science publishing crisis" (Fernandez-Patron & Hardy 2017). Being ourselves concerned about the issues dealt with in this article, we would like to make some remarks on it.

First, we agree with the authors that "science publishing is increasingly associated with a waste of time and resources by scientists and funding agencies alike", and that researchers "are enduring undue emotional distress". However, we disagree with the reason given: "rejection rates by journals reaching record levels". We do not think rejection rates should be lower. We think there is no "standard" rejection rate to compare with: a Journal must reject those papers considered not apt to be published (because they have not enough quality, or because they fall outside of the scope of the Journal, or simply because the Journal has no space to publish everything and has to select the papers judged the best). The root of the problem is not rejection rates, but the sheer need to publish in journals to be able to advance in one's professional career in Academia (Génova et al. 2016).

About the listed desiderata for science publishing:

(i) **A single universal repository.** This is already so in sites like arXiv, at least for some scientific areas (Mathematics, Physics, Computer Science, Biology, etc.), with thousands of papers added every month. In a sense, the whole Web is already a universal repository of whatever you want, including pre-prints of scientific papers or other versions. Why invent a new one? Open access is also a common practice nowadays and compulsory in some contexts, e.g. research projects funded by the European Commission, which requires universal and unrestricted access to the papers at some repository.

(ii) **A single presentation format.** There are so many presentation formats that expecting to reach an agreement for all fields of knowledge is… an impossible dream, even if we relax the requirement to "one format for each discipline". Moreover, what is the good of imposing a single presentation format for everybody? We humans speak many languages; cultural diversity is not an evil to be fought against, but a good to be preserved, as is suitable in the field of science.

(iii) **Post-publication corrections.** This is ok, but how would this inhibit fraud? We see no relation. Consider also the risk that, if correcting errors is too easy and has no penalty, then the temptation to publish unduly revised works would be higher.

(iv) **Non-anonymous and altruistic peer-review.** The pros and cons of blind review have been constantly discussed for years (Resnik & Elmore 2016), with strong views in favor (Moustafa 2015) and against (Agoramoorthy 2017), so we are not going to repeat here the arguments. It is difficult to see one system as better than the other, so we think every journal should freely choose one. Certainly, blind review is absolutely predominant, so we think promoting open reviews would be beneficial, but we also think years (or decades) of experience are needed before imposing it as the only option. Regarding altruism, we think it is already the case, since reviewers receive no financial reward for their work, even if they do benefit from the up to date information on what is going on in their field and receive a collateral contribution from the people who review their manuscripts. Finally, how all the proposed changes to peer-review can be implemented and coordinated is not clear to us, especially considering the expected huge number of publications. Who will do the job? What would be the incentives for commercial publishers and science journals in this envisioned "different kind of function and business model"?

(v) **Not-for-profit science publishing.** Science publishing is a service to society, therefore paying for it is completely fair: "the laborer is worthy of his reward".[1] We do not think it right that researchers have to pay to see their work published, but in most reputed journals (except Open Access ones) publishing involves no cost for the authors. The sustainability of science publishing demands that somebody has to pay. Even something so "simple" as assigning the digital object identifier (DOI) to each publication –and deciding which articles deserve it– has a cost: who is going to pay for it? Like all other economic activity, scientific publication must be regulated to avoid the desire for profits prevailing over its social purpose, but nothing else. We do not think the current system of (mainly) institutional subscriptions is so bad, with the cost of publication being carried by the publishers. Of course, the system may be corrupted with monopoly practices and so on; then, let's purify the system from its corruptions, but let's not condemn the system by itself. In addition, in some disciplines there is a clear trend towards over-population of low-value and low-quality papers, even sometimes repeated research and scam journals and conferences. We argue that the situation would worsen without some control by publishers.

(vi) **Publication venue vs value of work.** We fully agree that the important thing is the scientific value of the work, not the venue. However, journals do add value to scientific publishing: in a better or worse manner, they filter valuable publications, making it easier to find an interesting and reliable research. Research institutions

[1] A traditional saying, quoted from the Christian Bible, First Epistle of Saint Paul to Timothy, 5:18.

also prefer to publish their results in highly-ranked venues as a way to be renowned as leaders in their scientific fields. Of course, and again, the system may be corrupted. But nowadays you can publish whatever you want in your personal home page (and this is good, too). So, what is really the change you demand? On the other hand, it is not clear how the authors propose to effectively measure the value and impact of work. Most of the suggestions (e.g. tweets) might be strongly biased.

Summing up, we think the deficiency in science publishing is not professional publishing (thus paid and organized in institutions like journals), but the need to publish in the race for academic tenure. It might be better to regard the proposed ideas and changes in (Fernandez-Patron & Hardy 2017) as possible complements to the current system instead of as a substitution.

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