



The Future of Academic Journals?

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This is the 100th issue of *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*. For our journal this special occasion marks a milestone and should certainly provide an opportunity to celebrate the achievements of our authors and editors. It would therefore appear adequate to tell the story of the journal, explain developments during the past two decades, recall successes or remember anecdotes. I would rather use the occasion to discuss the future of the journal. Yet I will not focus on our journal specifically – which is not, and will probably never be, much different from other academic journals anyway – but on journal publication more generally. In times of changing teaching and research environments and the proliferation of electronic media, what is the function of academic journals and how can they fulfil it effectively?

Many people these days discuss economic aspects of publishing: Why are journals so expensive? Should academics participate within a system where publishers make profits on the back of services, such as peer reviewing, which are paid for by others – mainly by academic institutions through the provision of paid labour time of academics? Should access to journals be free of charge, especially to allow disadvantaged groups to benefit from academic knowledge? These are all important questions, I think, which need to be discussed rationally and which obviously require some changes to academic publishing, whatever they might be. I should make clear, however, that I am not discussing the thorny issues of open access or fair pricing at this time. These seem to me far too complicated to be tackled in a brief editorial. As you will see, my main concern here is the function of journals within the context of teaching and education.

It might help, when thinking about the future of academic publishing from an economic point of view, to also raise the basic issue of its very purpose. Here, perhaps a first stab at the problem would be to point out the function of quality control. Every academic and interested citizen should have an interest in reading high-quality papers, especially when paying substantial money for access. Surely the topic of what exactly makes for good or even excellent quality in the humanities is fiercely contested. But be that as it may, certain procedures that precede publication, peer review or other mechanisms, obviously contribute to enhancing the quality of journal outputs – even if we might not want to apply exactly the same mechanisms

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of quality control in the humanities as in the natural sciences, where factual and methodological checks are the main contributors to epistemic quality.

If we want to reserve the category of *scholarly* publications for quality checked articles then we can point out why academic journals serve an important function that cannot easily be replaced by academic websites, blogs, social networks, or document repositories. These alternative outlets usually are not checked for quality, at least not in a systematic way. So academic journals warrant epistemic quality – at least if everything goes right. Yet it is not really clear why academic journals are the only or even the best instruments for producing scholarly publications. Surely other publication outlets can be based on peer review and related mechanisms of maintaining scholarly standards?

It is often said that academic journals, at least in their current form of distribution, undermine the ideal of access to scholarship for all. This problem has become more visible since the invention of the internet, because today almost everyone routinely has access to a host of information. The only direct hurdle is lack of money to pay for increasing amount of content. In the not too distant past, almost every citizen (in developed countries) had access to an enormous amount of published information, provided by public libraries. But this level of provision has become more difficult to maintain under conditions of budget cuts. In addition, students and citizens today want to access content from home, via the internet. Surely, in such a situation the steep fees for academic content, especially journal subscriptions, appear outrageous. Still, I believe it is not straightforward why free access to all will help solving the underlying problems. The main problem is that epistemic quality cannot be maintained for free. Even if academic content is provided without financial costs for users, someone will have to pay, because warranting quality necessarily creates economic costs.

One of the most significant problems in academia today, especially as regards teaching, is to distinguish between scholarly and non-scholarly publications. Even students, who certainly have relatively effortless access to scholarly publications via their institutional libraries, often make extensive use of non-scholarly sources in their research and assessed work. To be sure, this point is not supposed to imply that non-scholarly sources are bad – they can certainly serve important functions; yet they are usually not valuable academic resources. About 25 years ago, students would usually be indirectly forced to only access scholarly publications for their assignments, simply because there was no internet and they therefore had to use physical outputs, which they found in university libraries. Because today academic resources are much easier to access online, especially if they are not hidden behind a pay wall, it seems that the way forward to enhance academic teaching and research, as well as knowledge in the general public, is to make scholarly publications easily accessible online. Hence the push for open access and similar policies.

However, this move does not tackle the main problem: the common ignorance about, and incapacity to distinguish, scholarly from non-scholarly sources. Accordingly, I believe the main problem as regards teaching is to do with the required skills of users, not with the price of the content. Making all academic content freely available actually makes the difference even harder to identify for users. Currently, one fairly reliable criterion for identifying scholarly publications is the price tag that comes with it on the internet, together with the indirect sign of being accessible only via academic institutions. If that signal disappears, what's left? Surely it is right to insist, first, that this outcome of flattening the difference between scholarly and non-scholarly content might be worth it anyway, and second and perhaps more importantly, that the distinction is something that needs to be instilled in people as a capacity. After all, even goods of low quality usually cost some money, so having a price tag or being located at a particular site

cannot be valid quality criteria. In a word, we cannot blame open access for confusion about scholarship. I think this is indeed correct and I also do not want to imply that the size of a price tag is evidence of the quality of a product. I merely want to say that in order to be of sufficient epistemic quality a publication will necessarily have some price, however high and whoever pays for it. In terms of the mentioned problem of identifying scholarly content one might want to ask, what else should replace a price tag as a vehicle of discriminating between scholarly and non-scholarly sources?

In order to distinguish between scholarly and non-scholarly publications, users need to have some basic capacities of a scholar. Because that expertise cannot be instilled in everyone, it is vital to establish an easily identifiable marker, perhaps similar to labels we find in the food industry or for household goods – it may be called “scholarly approved content (SAC)”. It does not seem necessary that such content would only be published in journals or by academic publishers. Still, there would need to be institutions in place for overseeing processes of quality control. The criteria for scholarly approval would need to be discussed and agreed. People would have to be employed to oversee the process of quality control, which itself of course would still be performed by academics, if perhaps outside their normal working hours and directly paid for. There would need to be regulations and sanctions for violations of rules in gaining the desired label for published content. Now, it should be fairly easy to see that for all these mechanisms of policing academic quality control we would require financial resources. As mentioned before, you cannot produce good quality without creating any costs.

It seems that the overseeing functions of quality control are already fulfilled – by academic publishers. They secure scholarly approved content by certain policies and procedures; they make this content accessible in books and journals. So, altogether, it does not seem that we need to reinvent the wheel. Before the internet, what was published by academic publishers was relatively easy to identify: It was the stuff you found in a university library. But this is not how most of us access sources these days. Hence the sticking point is that modern customers, on the internet, do not normally have the expertise to distinguish content provided by academic publishers from other sources. To attach an additional, easily understandable and identifiable label, such as SAC, would require additional institutions and resources yet again, because surely we would need to establish an International Commission for Academic Scholarship (ICAS), or something the like?

It seems obvious to me that traditional academic publishers should not be the only institutions that regularly publish scholarly content. It is also obvious that the economics of production and consumption of academic content will have to be discussed – in fact, these have been discussed for a while. Still, in the end alternative institutions that would be allowed to publish under the label of academic scholarship would likely be fairly similar to traditional publishers. So probably not much will change in terms of the mechanics of producing scholarly publications – and perhaps that’s a good thing?

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