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Editorial

Bait and switches in academic publishing

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On July 5th, 2023, the editorial team and board of *Critical Public Health* resigned *en masse* in protest over changes in the journal's direction being instigated by its owner and publisher Taylor & Francis, including, amongst other things, a push for the journal to move to open access under an author-pays, or article-processing charge (APC), model (see Bell et al. 2021). As readers will know, the *Journal of Critical Public Health* is the result of this breakup: a scholar-led diamond open access journal that is free to both readers and authors (Bunton et al. 2024).

As a former co-editor of the journal who was witness to what went on behind the scenes during our breakup, I can tell you that it was a battle to even keep 'critical public health' in our name, because Taylor & Francis declared ownership of the 'brand' (the title, to be clear, was never trademarked). Despite the fact that we began life as a scholar-owned publication and our growth was due primarily to the hard work of the academics that staffed it, the editorial team at the time of our departure – thankfully, I was not one – was subject to demands from Taylor & Francis for us to change our proposed journal name so as not to 'infringe' their 'intellectual property rights'. However, they ultimately changed course.

Because Taylor & Francis got to keep the journal's name and branding, including, most significantly, its impact factor – a proprietary metric available only to journals indexed in Web of Science's Core Collection – they responded by simply collapsing their author-pays open access journal *Cogent Public Health* into *Critical Public Health*. Although it was, for all intents and purposes, an entirely different journal, this meant that the former journal substantially increased its profile simply because its *branding* had changed.

In this editorial, I would like to reflect on this phenomenon – what I am calling here 'bait and switches' in academic publishing. Rather than representing an anomaly, I want to suggest that it's simply business as usual for corporate publishers. While few are in the position to be able to substitute a lower-tiered open access journal for a higher ranked subscription one, they have realised – or, at the very least, assumed – that branding is all that matters to academics.

I came to an epiphany about this recently, on the basis of an experience that I suspect will be familiar to at least some readers. To elaborate, I submitted a paper to a reputable journal that went through a fairly standard, albeit rather lengthy, review process. The formal decision was 'revise and resubmit' and I extensively reworked the paper based on the feedback and resubmitted it, expecting it to be sent back out for review. Instead, within 10 minutes of resubmission, it was desk rejected. The new journal editor, who had taken over the journal in the six months following the submission of my original manuscript, indicated that it was no longer a good fit for the journal I'd submitted it to, which had since narrowed its scope. However, I was assured that it was an excellent fit for their new open access 'sister' journal that was currently accepting submissions, and I was invited to transfer the manuscript there.

When I complained to the editor, he seemed genuinely surprised. From his point of view, he had offered an alternative that would accelerate and simplify the path to publication. However, my own view was that I was trying to engage with a set of conversations that had happened in the journal and had embarked on an intellectual dialogue during the revision process that I wanted to see through to completion. I also resented the manuscript being funnelled into an untested journal where I had no sense of the content and that, to add insult to injury, required APCs for publication. Although my university would have covered the fees via its JISC 'read and publish' agreement, I declined the invitation and went elsewhere.

This scenario has become increasingly commonplace in academic publishing. Look at some of the major journal publishers today and you will notice that many have expanded their offerings, with their high-prestige journals joined by open access counterparts – prominently branded, of course. For example, Nature now has over 30 journals bearing its name and the British Medical Journal group has recently launched its 'BMJ Connections' journals. Intellectually closer to home, *Social Science & Medicine* has been joined by *SSM Population Health*, *SSM Qualitative Research in Health* and *SSM Mental Health*.

Despite the general lack of critical commentary on the rise of branded open access journals, this is no minor shift but speaks to a radical reconceptualisation of academic publishing itself. As Pattinson and Currie (2024) observe, what we are witnessing is the wholesale transformation of academic journals into corporate brands and authors into customers. As they note, 'Journal cascade systems – where rejected research is redirected to other journals in a portfolio – became a way of maintaining the power of existing brands through perceived impact, quality, or exclusivity, without having to refuse the money'.

Clearly, the rise of APC models of open access engendered this transformation, because authors had become paying customers that publishers were now invested in retaining. According to Pattinson and Currie (2024), 'Instead of being filters for "bad research", journals now stratify it according to brand values'. In this respect, publishers aren't much different from, say, the Volkswagen group, which operates a tiered portfolio consisting of luxury brands like Lamborghini, status brands like Audi, and more accessible brands like Volkswagen. However, the difference is that publishers don't even bother to actually create the new product and build an audience first. Instead, the market is assumed to come built into the product – kind of like creating a completely untested car and slapping a 'Lamborghini-lite' label on it based on the premise that the brand alone is enough to sell the car.

Of course, journal branding itself is not new. Via the aforementioned journal impact factor, Web of Science has become critical to the global economy of publications and citations, with the emergence of systems of academic audit making it increasingly salient as a proxy measure of researchers' quality and impact (Burrows 2012, Eve & Priego 2017). Originally intended as a means of helping librarians make decisions about which journals to purchase, it soon became the lucrative heart of Thomson Reuters' business model (Bohannon 2016), which explains why it has since been bought out by the publicly listed company Clarivate Analytics (see Bell 2018a).

One advantage of these new forms of academic branding is that they allow publishers to circumvent the journal impact factor and the publishing track record it typically requires. For example, neither *SSM Qualitative Research in Health* nor *SSM Mental Health* has an impact factor, although both are listed in the Emerging Sources Citation Index – basically a waiting room where journals bide their time in the hopes of being promoted to more prestigious Web of Science indexes with journal impact factors attached (see Bell 2018b). But this lack is mitigated to a large extent by their association with *Social Science & Medicine*, which has just as much brand recognition for its core market as the journal impact factor itself.

On the rare occasions this phenomenon is discussed in online academic forums, it's mostly framed in positive terms. 'The main advantage with these trickle-through systems is that it saves you having to jump through formatting hoops' writes one Reddit commenter (granolawarrior n.d.). Academics particularly like the idea of efficiency and speed – metrics which prominently feature on journals' pages: '8 days submission to first decision!', '74 days submission to decision after review'. But if these are the main criteria we are now using to assess journals, then it seems to me that we need to ask some hard

questions about precisely what it is we are aiming to accomplish with academic publishing, and that perhaps the tail is now wagging the dog.

In point of fact, the editorial team of the former *CPH* (and current *JCPH*) have been asking these questions for the past five years, when the cracks in our relationship with Taylor & Francis first began to appear. In our 2021 editorial, we asked, 'is the "journal" now merely a container, whose primary purpose is to signal 'quality' in a metricised academic world where a scholar's worth is determined by the prestige of the outlets they publish in?' (Bell et al. 2021, p. 377). We wondered whether anyone would notice – or care – if the 'management team' of *CPH* was replaced. Well, the management team *was* replaced and some people noticed (and cared – including, presumably, anyone reading *JCPH*), but others didn't. For better or worse, *CPH* is clearly thriving, although it's a fundamentally different journal by any measure.

Given the sheer volume of APC open access journals now bearing the branding of their more prestigious siblings, publishers are clearly not wrong in their assumption that authors will be attracted to 'branded' journals. Arguably, this has been especially the case since the rise of 'read and publish' agreements, where costs are no longer directly borne by authors themselves. As Moriarty (2016) has observed, academic publishing makes hypocrites of us all, although 'it's very difficult to see how to break the cycle'. Indeed, reclaiming academic publishing would require us to reconsider the entire 'knowledge economy' itself, along with the ways in which well-intentioned initiatives like Plan S have exacerbated some of the very problems they aimed to solve.

This is precisely what *JCPH* – and the growing number of journals that have abandoned their corporate owners – are aiming to accomplish. But that relies on the assumption that journals have contributions to make beyond their branding. I think they are right. Indeed, I hope to *god* they are right. My own view – perhaps naively – is that journals still have a place as curators of knowledge and conversations, especially in a field as contested, yet *critical*, as public health itself.

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Kirsten Bell is a former co-editor of *Critical Public Health* and a current editorial board member and journal production editor of the *Journal of Critical Public Health*. These roles have inflected her views on the current state of academic publishing.

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