

Addicted to the brand: The hypocrisy of a publishing academic

Academics generally recognise that the scholarly publishing business model is flawed, the impact factor does not point to quality, and open access is a good idea. And yet, academics continue to submit their work to the same for-profit journals. **Philip Moriarty** looks at what is keeping academics from practicing what they preach. Despite many efforts to counter the perception, journal 'branding' remains exceptionally important.



This piece is part of a series on the [Accelerated Academy](#).

I'm going to put this as bluntly as I can; it's been niggling and nagging at me for quite a while and it's about time I got it off my chest. When it comes to publishing research, I have to come clean: I'm a hypocrite. I spend quite some time railing about the deficiencies in the traditional publishing system, and all the while I'm bolstering that self-same system by my selection of the "appropriate" journals to target.

Despite bemoaning the [statistical illiteracy](#) of academia's reliance on nonsensical metrics like impact factors, and despite regularly venting my spleen during talks at conferences about the too-slow evolution of academic publishing towards a more open and honest system, I nonetheless continue to contribute to the problem. (And I take little comfort in knowing that I'm not alone in this.)



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One of those spleen-venting conferences was a fascinating and important event held in Prague back in December, organized by [Filip Vostal](#) and [Mark Carrigan](#): "[Power, Acceleration, and Metrics in Academic Life](#)". My presentation, [The Power, Perils and Pitfalls of Peer Review in Public](#) – please excuse the [Partridgean overkill on the alliteration](#) – largely focused on the question of post-publication peer review (PPPR) via online channels such as [PubPeer](#). I've written at length, however, on PPPR previously ([here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)) so I'm not going to rehearse and rehash

those arguments. I instead want to explain just why I levelled the accusation of hypocrisy and why I am far from confident that we'll see a meaningful revolution in academic publishing any time soon.

Let's start with a few 'axioms'/principles that, while perhaps not being entirely self-evident in each case, could at least be said to represent some sort of consensus among academics:

- **The business model of the traditional academic publishing industry is deeply flawed.** While some might argue that George Monbiot – or at least the sub-editor who provided the title for [his article on the subject](#) a few years back (“[Academic publishers make Murdoch look like a socialist](#)”) – perhaps overstated the problem just a little, it is clear that the [profit margins and working practices for many publishers](#) are beyond the pale. (A major contribution to those profit margins is, of course, the indirect and substantial public subsidy, via editing and reviewing, too often provided gratis by the academic community).
- **A journal's impact factor (JIF) is clearly not a good indicator of the quality of a paper published in that journal.** The JIF has been skewered many, many times with some of the more memorable and important critiques coming from [Stephen Curry](#), [Dorothy Bishop](#), [David Colquhoun](#), [Jenny Rohn](#), and, most recently, [this illuminating post from Stuart Cantrill](#). Yet its very strong influence tenaciously persists and pervades academia. I regularly receive CVs from potential postdocs where they 'helpfully' highlight the JIF for each of the papers in their list of publications. Indeed, some go so far as to rank their publications on the basis of the JIF.
- **Given that the majority of research is publicly funded, it is important to ensure that open access publication becomes the norm.** This one is arguably rather more contentious and there are clear differences in the appreciation of open access (OA) publishing between disciplines, with the arts and humanities arguably being rather less welcoming of OA than the sciences. Nonetheless, the key importance of OA has laudably [been recognized by Research Councils UK \(RCUK\)](#) and all researchers funded by any of the seven UK research councils are mandated to make their papers available via either a green or gold OA route (with the gold OA route, [seen by many as a sop to the publishing industry](#), often being prohibitively expensive).

With these three “axioms” in place, it now seems rather straight-forward to make a decision as to the journal(s) our research group should choose as the appropriate forum for our work. We should put aside any consideration of impact factor and aim to select those journals which eschew the traditional for-(large)-profit publishing model and provide cost-effective open access publication, right?

Indeed, we're particularly fortunate because there's an exemplar of open access publishing in our research area: [The Beilstein Journal of Nanotechnology](#). Not only are papers in the Beilstein J. Nanotech free to the reader (and easy to locate and download online), but publishing there is free: no exorbitant gold OA costs nor, indeed, any type of charge to the author(s) for publication. ([The Beilstein Foundation](#) has very deep pockets and laudably shoulders all of the costs).

But take a look at [our list of publications](#) — although we indeed publish in the Beilstein J. Nanotech., the number of our papers appearing there can be counted on the fingers of (less than) one hand. So, while I espouse the three principles listed above, I hypocritically don't practice what I preach. What's my excuse?

In academia, journal brand is everything. I have sat in many committees, read many CVs, and participated in many discussions where candidates for a postdoctoral position, a fellowship, or other roles at various rungs of the academic career ladder have been compared. And very often, the committee members will say something along the lines of “*Well, Candidate X has got much better publications than Candidate Y*”...without ever having read the papers of either candidate. The judgment of quality is lazily “outsourced” to the brand-name of the journal. If it's in a Nature journal, it's obviously of higher quality than something published in one of those, ahem, “lesser” journals.

If, as principal investigator, I were to advise the PhD students and postdocs in the group here at Nottingham that, in line with the three principles above, they should publish all of their work in the Beilstein J. Nanotech., it would be career suicide for them. To hammer this point home, here's the advice from one referee of a paper we recently submitted:

"I recommend re-submission of the manuscript to the Beilstein Journal of Nanotechnology, where works of similar quality can be found. The work is definitively well below the standards of [Journal Name]."

There is very clearly a well-established hierarchy here. Journal 'branding', and, worse, journal impact factor, remain exceptionally important in (falsely) establishing the perceived quality of a piece of research, despite many efforts to counter this perception, including, most notably, [DORA](#). My hypocritical approach to publishing research stems directly from this perception. I know that if I want the researchers in my group to stand a chance of competing with their peers, we have to target "those" journals. The same is true for all the other PIs out there. While we all complain bitterly about the impact factor monkey on our back, we're locked into the addiction to journal brand.

And it's very difficult to see how to break the cycle...

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

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