What was, is and will be critical about journal publishing?

Journal Item

What was, is and will be critical about journal publishing?

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This is the author's version of the paper accepted for publication in *Ephemera*.

Abstract

Responding to the call of this special issue, I consider the past, present and future of criticality in journal publishing. In particular, I ask what 'being critical' has meant over the ages in journal publishing and play with two senses of the word 'critical' – that of critique and that of being essential. I consider how these two aspects of criticality have evolved in relation to each other, interweaving and intertwining, through past into the present, and in what directions they might evolve in the future. I conclude that academic journal publishing has always been critical in both senses of the word, but that what matters for the future of critical publishing is the nuance of criticality. I argue that the current context is an opportune moment for a more radical reimagining of journals, and for their remaking as simultaneously more and less critical by moving beyond critique-as-censure and towards new modes of being essential. In this remaking, the nuance of 'being critical' needs to be negotiated through an open and reflexive politics of critique directed towards social, political and organisational action, and infused and tempered with a politics of care and marginalism.

Keywords: critique; criticality; academic journals; journal publishing; critical publishing; journal editors

Introduction

Critique has a history, or to be more precise, many histories (Foucault, 1996), and so does journal publishing. In Foucault's reading, critique emerged as one of key constructs of the Enlightenment, and in particular as resistance to the 'veritable explosion' of the will to govern and the art of governing from the 15th century onwards (Foucault, 1996: 383). From the appearance of first scholarly periodicals in the 17th century, academic journal publishing developed a reliance on critique as evaluative discourse and as a technology of intervention (Broman, 2000a), which remained central but evolved a more inward focus over the course of the centuries. Furthermore, the use of critique became entwined with the critical role of journal publishing in the production and consumption of academic knowledge.

In this paper, I respond to the call of this special issue and consider the past, present and future of criticality in journal publishing. In particular, I ask what 'being critical' has meant over the ages in journal publishing and play with two senses of the word 'critical' – that of critique and that of being essential. I consider how these two aspects of criticality have evolved in relation to each other, interweaving and intertwining, through past into the present, and in what directions they might evolve in the future. I conclude that academic journal publishing has always been critical in both senses of the word, but that what matters for the future of critical publishing is the nuance of criticality. When such nuance is considered, what comes to the fore is the historical development of journal criticality as, ironically, an instrument of stasis[1] rather than of questioning power relations and of societal action and transformation. This has increasingly given rise to a journal publishing system which, rather than channelling and amplifying the kind of critique that embodies and

[1] With thanks to one of the anonymous reviewers (Reviewer 2) of this paper for this apt phrase. In general, I am indebted to both reviewers of this paper for helping me sharpen and develop it.

precipitates a transformative crisis (Deslandes, 2017) and conveys the meaning of the experiences of the oppressed to stimulate social change (Horkheimer, 2002), instead reduces critique to internally-oriented censure and policing of the scholarly community. In this configuration of criticality, journals are notably a) critical *to* academic careers in which they play a conformist role in the context of neoliberal, managerialist, consumerist, and increasingly precarious Higher Education (HE), and b) critical *of* deviations from established conventions both in terms *what* is written and published and *how* it is written and published.

I argue that the current context is an opportune moment for a more radical reimagining of journals, and for their remaking as simultaneously more and less critical by moving beyond critique-as-censure and towards new modes of being essential. In this remaking, the nuance of 'being critical' needs to be negotiated through an open and reflexive politics of critique directed towards social, political and organisational action, and infused and tempered with a politics of care and marginalism.

The paper is structured chronologically – I start with a history of 'being critical' from the first appearance of scholarly periodicals onwards, then proceed to contemporary journal publishing, and finally conclude with proposals for what 'being critical' in journal publishing might look like in the future.

What was critical about the emergence and development of academic journals?

There are two aspects of the early history of scholarly journal publishing that are important for the purposes of this paper: 1) the critical role scholarly periodicals played in scientific communities from their first appearance, and 2) the development of their use of critique as a technology of intervention – both in society at large and in scholarly knowledge production. I discuss each of these two aspects in turn, showing how they intertwined and reinforced each other, leading eventually to what is typically thought of as contemporary academic journal publishing.

Critical to the development of science

Right from their inception, scholarly journals have been critical to the development of science. Histories of scientific periodicals (e.g. Houghton, 1975; Kronick, 1976; Lindsey, 1978; Manten, 1980; Goldgar, 1995; Broman, 2000a) emphasise their essential role, which had to do with the dual purpose of scholarly publishing as communication and control of scholarly knowledge (Cummings and Frost, 1995; Lindsey, 1978). To put it in Foucauldian terms, right from the outset scholarly periodicals grew into what can be understood as capillaries and conduits of power-knowledge (Foucault, 1980; 1991) constitutive of the Enlightenment and then post-Enlightenment science.

The journal publishing system that dominates global academia today has its roots in the invention and spread of printing. Blockprinting was invented in China during the Tang dynasty in the 8th century AD, and movable type a few centuries later in the Sung period; in Japan, blockprinting was used as early as 770 AD, and in Egypt in 950 (Manten, 1980: 1-2). The invention of printing enabled China to develop one of the earliest scholarly publishing systems, which was soon introduced to neighbouring East and Southeast Asian countries, where it was critical to spreading the influence and prestige of Chinese science and education. For a long time, this system developed independently in the region until the Western contemporary scholarly publishing started to dominate and replace it about a century ago (Xia, 2006).

In Europe, prior to the use of printing, 'new scientific information was spread initially almost exclusively by scholars wandering from one university to another' (Manten, 1980:2). This restricted exchange of news and thus collective science making to major centres of learning that benefited from the busiest traffic of scholars. As printing became more commonplace after the introduction of the Gutenberg movable press in the 15th century, '[m]any learned authors – university professors, for instance – became their own printers and booksellers, or controlled a small printing establishment', and some universities founded their own printing houses (such as the Oxford University Press that dates back to 1478). Scholars were now travelling 'far and wide' to try to sell their books. Yet despite the improvements brought about by printing, 'the growing trade of books and manuscripts in the later Middle Ages was unable really to remedy the rather slow and selective dissemination of new knowledge' due to the delays associated with book production and distribution (Manten, 1980:2).

A new stage of scholarly correspondence began with the establishment of a network of regular postal routes in the territories of the Holy Roman Empire during the political and religious upheavals that followed the Reformation of 1517 (Manten 1980). The post was originally used mainly for the purposes of conveying diplomatic correspondence but quickly diversified into handling other correspondence too, giving rise to networks of correspondents maintaining contact with each other. News of political developments and commercial undertakings could then be exchanged, and rulers employed 'correspondents in different parts of Europe to send them reports on current events' (Broman, 2000a: 227). Soon the production of newsletters developed into a major undertaking. Those situated at nodal points of the new correspondence networks played an important role – this included prominent persons of letters, powerful banking and merchant houses and, especially, postmasters, who were particularly well-placed for copying and passing on newsletters. These early handwritten newsletters did not circulate widely or openly, but the development of printed newspapers –

from the sporadic broadsides of the 16th century to the regular newspapers that began to appear in the early 17th century[2] started to address a broader audience (Broman, 2000a).

The development of European correspondence networks also supported the development of scholarly communication. Relying on established postal routes, letters containing news of research work undertaken, requesting or bestowing patronage, requesting specific information and communicating news of recent books began to be written regularly by individuals or groups of scholars to other individuals or groups of scholars (Manten 1980; Goldgar 1995). This led to the development of 'hidden' or 'invisible colleges' – informal networks of scholars remaining in ongoing contact with each other (Manten 1980). Just as with the general correspondence, those well-placed at the nodal points of these networks 'became, like postmasters, virtual clearinghouses of information for their contacts in diverse corners of Europe'[3] (Broman 2000a: 228).

The first scholarly periodicals appeared in late 17th century in France, England, Italy and Germany[4] (Kronick, 1976; Manten, 1980; Broman, 2000a). In the 18th century, other journals followed, including in Spain, US, Hungary, and Russia, and France led the scholarly publishing sphere with over 50 scientific and popular science journals (Garrison, 1934; Rykov and Polyakov, 2014). The journal numbers soon started to grow rapidly, 'from two in 1665 to about 30 in 1700, to about 750 in 1800 and to a few thousands as early as 1850' (Manten, 1980: 1). The first scholarly journals and journal editors emerged from the nodal positions in the circuits of knowledge and power constituting the invisible colleges. One

[2] Postmasters still played an important role in this, which is reflected in some of the newspaper titles (containing 'Post' or 'Courier') (Broman, 2000a).
[3] Manten gives the salon of Father Martin Mersenne in Paris and the office of Henry Oldenburg in London as two examples of such scholarly clearing houses (Manten 1980: 4).
[4] The French *Journal des Sçavans* was first, appearing in January 1665, with the English *Philosophical Transactions* that is still ongoing today a close second, starting a few months later. These were followed by the Italian *Giornale de'Letterati* in 1682 and the German *Acta Eruditorium* and *Monatsgespräche* in 1688.

notorious example is that of Henry Oldenburg – a well-connected and highly influential secretary of the Royal Society, whose office had served as one of the major clearinghouses of scholarly correspondence before Oldenburg inaugurated *Philosophical Transactions* in 1665 (Manten 1980). The journal acted as a means of formalising Oldenburg's correspondence network, and at the same time the journal's 'standing in the scholarly world was secured by the prestige of the early Royal Society, and by the extensive network of contacts maintained by Oldenburg' (Broman 2000a: 228-229). Oldenburg exercised considerable discretion over the *Philosophical Transactions* as its direction, composition and publication remained his personal responsibility up until the journal's seventh volume, when it became the official publication of the Royal Society (Houghton 1975; Manten 1980).

Critique as a technology of intervention

Although early editors like Oldenburg acted as nodal points in the scholarly circuits of power, they were still missing the consistent use of one of the major journal and knowledge shaping technologies used by editors today – namely criticism as evaluative discourse (Broman 2000a). Embryonic critique in the first journals can be seen in isolated examples, such as the free-wheeling criticism of the founding editor of *Journal des Sçavans* De Sallo, which led to the withdrawal of the journal's licence after only thirteen weeks for the first year of its publication[5] (Broman 2000a: 229), and in the case of the physician and anatomist Thomas Bertholm, whose journal[6] effectively served as a forum for disseminating his ideas, and who 'can be considered as a precursor of the critical editors of the nineteenth century in that he often embellished the communications he published in the Acta with his own comments and notes' (Houghton 1975: 17).

[5] After that the journal was re-licensed and returned with a new, less combative editor (Broman, 2000: 229).
[6] The Acta Medica et Pholosophia Hafniensia, published in Copenhagen between 1673 and 1680 and strongly medical in character (Houghton, 1975: 17).

At the same time, as can already be glimpsed from the example of De Sallo, journals and editors were themselves subject to critical intervention in the form of external censure and, specifically, initially ecclesiastical and royal control and later government and state control (Hall, 2017). Publishing was a licensed privilege, which could be easily revoked. In the 17^{th} century England, for example, 'the Crown, the Star Chamber and Parliament took turns deciding what might be published' (Rembar, 1969: 17), and in the 18^{th} century Russia it was not uncommon for the Tsar himself to act as an editor before a periodical issue could go to print (Rykov and Polyakov, 2014). According to Hall (2017), external censorship persisted mostly unchallenged until mid- to late-20^{th} century when publishers and editors began first to contest it a lot more persistently and successfully and then consistently internalise it into forms of self-censorship.

Meanwhile, journals developed and honed their own uses of critique. A more consistent use first began with the introduction of the critical book review, which was a stepping-stone towards the scholarly journals becoming 'conduits of criticism' into the public sphere (Broman, 2001a). The two senses of 'critical' intertwined here – according to Broman, contemporary science would not be 'the journal-based entity we know it as' (i.e. journals would not be as critical to contemporary science and academia more broadly) if scholarly periodicals had not taken on that function of critique. In becoming 'conduits of criticism', scholarly journals developed into disciplinary instruments that made full use of two important constructs of the Enlightenment – the 'public' as a justification provider and criticism as an associated technology of public and social intervention (Broman, 2002a).

Much has been written about the invention of the 'public' in conjunction with critique for legitimation of intervention (see, for example, La Vopa (1992) for a critical review of Koselleck (1988) and Habermas (1989) on this topic, and Goodman (1992) for a broader analysis of Koselleck's, Habermas', Ariès' and Chartier's contributions to this). The 'public' was a key, characteristic and powerful construct of the Enlightenment, and its invention and eventually widespread acceptance transformed the meaning of 'opinion' from something fickle and narrowly prejudiced as it was generally understood as late as mid-18th century to something that, when paired with 'public' as 'public opinion', began to be seen as 'the authoritative judgement of a collective conscience, the ruling of a tribunal to which even the state was subject' by the end of the 18th century (La Vopa 1992: 7925). This conceptualisation and the growing authority of the 'public' eventually made it possible to give new weight to critical judgements in journal *public*ations. When scholarly journals, as prime vehicles of published scientific communication, began to use criticism as an instrument of intervention in social and public lives by incorporating evaluative judgements, it was,

> 'significant both for the cultural role of periodicals and for the public authority of scientific knowledge […] For judgements published in journals had a public character that did not pertain to opinions and judgements contained in unpublished letters. This is not to say that private letters never had public consequences […] But judgements made in print became not just one person whispering in a correspondent's ear, but instead a new kind of public and authoritative voice'. (Broman, 2000a: 229-230)

The power of published critique was further enhanced with the addition of anonymity. The latter first started to feature as a way of maximising the authority of early critical book reviews incorporated into journals. Anonymity allowed authors to position their published voices as proxies for the public – as speaking for the public whilst simultaneously instructing the public (Broman, 2000a, 2000b). With the onset of professionalisation and institutionalisation of science in the 19th century, the use of anonymous critique became increasingly embedded in the formalising peer-based manuscript review process until the latter eventually acquired its contemporary double-blind form as standard academic journal publishing practice in the 20th century (Lindsey, 1978). This paved the way and provided a mechanism for the growing inward focus of critique-as-intervention as publishers and editors began to internalise censorship into forms of self-policing (Hall, 2017).

What is critical about contemporary journal publishing?

The above discussion brings us to the contemporary era of journal publishing, and to debates over the skewed nature of editorial and reviewer critique that tends to reinforce orthodoxies and keep out approaches critical of the mainstream, especially in the 'publish or perish' context of journal performance metrics that have exacerbated the already critical role of journals. What is at stake here is the capacity of academic journals to act as conduits of more radical forms of critique-as-intervention, in other words, more transformative forms of political, social and economic critique that can speak truth to power, challenge oppression and stimulate progressive, emancipatory change (Horkheimer, 2002). In a journal publishing system in which criticality is predominantly inward-focused and conformative of established conventions and power relations, such capacity is curtailed. In this section I discuss these aspects of 'being critical' first in relation to contemporary journal publishing in general, then in relation to Management and Organization Studies (MOS) journals, and finally drawing out some implications specifically for journals that position themselves as 'critical'.

Skewed critique and publish or perish

Editorial and reviewer censorship of papers and authors is one of the key distinguishing characteristics of contemporary journal publishing. This has been subject of much critique revolving around the notion of journal editors as 'gatekeepers of science' (a term popularised by Crane (1967)) – whereby editorial critique-as-censure (of papers and authors) is seen as pervasive, excessive, biased and skewed, in that the exercise of its power keeps what editors consider undesirable approaches out of the public domain and, vice versa, includes their preferred approaches. Over many decades now journal publishing critics (Crane, 1967; De

Grazia, 1963; Lindsey, 1978 as early examples) have argued that this skewed nature (sometimes labelled 'confirmatory bias') of editorial and reviewer critique sustains and reproduces orthodoxies and established power relations in academia and beyond. As Lindsey (1978: 98) writes about gatekeeping, it results in

> 'restricting admission to the public forum only to those who are sympathetic to the dominant paradigm, theoretical perspective, or currently accepted line of enquiry. Critics of the major approaches, or individuals developing new lines of analysis, may be thwarted by eminent scientists who have built their reputations on the traditional approaches'.

In other words, skewed gatekeeping is a kind of critique that keeps out critique of the orthodox. It implies that journal editors and reviewers tend to be overly critical in relation to non-mainstream approaches and insufficiently critical in relation to orthodox ones, contributing to the reproduction of what in Kuhnian terms (Kuhn, 1996) can be understood as normal science (De Rond and Miller, 2005) through a guardianship of both scientific and disciplinary conventions. Both 'scientific' and 'disciplinary' aspects are important here. As the gatekeeping debates developed, critics of the journal publishing process contesting the necessity for social sciences to imitate the natural sciences began to note that the reproduction of orthodoxies through the exercise of editorial and reviewer critique tends to translate into the guardianship of scientific methods and conventions (themselves constituting orthodoxies). This has disciplining effects for what counts as knowledge acceptable for publication:

> '[The publication system] assumes that there is a measure by which papers may be clearly separated into good or bad, useful or useless. This measure is "scientific" method. Papers not conforming to this yardstick are "poorly written" or exhibit "sloppy methodology" and cannot conceivably contribute to pure knowledge.' (Van Wyk, 1998: 251)

This is particularly significant as over the centuries since the first appearance of scholarly periodicals their critical role in the production of academic knowledge has anything but waned. Once again, the entanglement of 'critical' as critique and as being essential is notable here. With the onset and development of neoliberal, new-managerialist 'New Higher Education' (Jary and Parker, 1998) with its accompanying audit culture (Strathern, 2000), increasingly incessant and pervasive mechanisms of academic performance measurement and management developed from late-20th century onwards (Amit, 2000; Shore and Roberts, 1995; Shore & Wright, 2000a; Willmott, 1995). These mechanisms have effectively prioritised and privileged journal publishing (Willmott, 2003) so that its role for academic careers and for the survival and development of academic departments and universities has become so critical in many academic fields as to truly warrant the moniker 'publish or perish' (Darnhill, 1996; De Rond and Miller, 2005; Van Wyk, 1998). Moreover, in an ironic neoliberal reincarnation of external censure, these mechanisms of academic performance measurement have also subjected the journals themselves to assessment and critique, as reflected in the now ubiquitous journal guides, rankings, citation indices and impact factors. One of the well-recognised effects of this has been the further skewing of critique towards the mainstream in the scrabble for publication in what are seen as 'top' or 'high-ranking' journals (Barry et al, 2001; Harley and Lee, 1997).

Critique and criticality in and around MOS journal publishing

MOS journal publishing embodies all the elements of critique and being critical discussed so far. MOS is very much dominated by journal publications as the privileged form of performance-managed academic 'output' and is becoming increasingly so. For example, 80% of Business and Management publication submissions to the 2001 UK national Research Assessment Exercise[7] were journal articles (Geary et al, 2004), which rose to 92% in the 2008 exercise (Mingers et al, 2012). This makes MOS journal publishing a career-critical

[7] The prime mechanism for allocating research funding to universities in the UK, now renamed 'Research Excellence Framework'.

activity, in the ‘publish or perish’ sense. As Beverungen et al (2012: 929), who call journals ‘the *sine qua non* of early 21st century academic life’ in business schools, put it: ‘Whilst other disciplines have retained the book length research monograph as the apogee of academic achievement, in management and organization studies, as in many of the social sciences, it is the publication of articles in highly ranked journals that will make or break an academic career’.

MOS critics have spoken out persistently about problems with the current journal publishing system. Their critique has included the publish or perish effects of journal publications being career-critical (De Rond and Miller, 2005; Miller et al, 2011), which is combined with excessive editorial and peer review criticality. This manifests as unnecessary tampering with papers and leads to the erosion of the autonomy of authors who can be subject to reviewers’ whimsy (Bedeian, 2004; Brewis, 2018) and are pressured to make changes with which they do not agree (Bedeian, 2003; Gabriel, 2010). Given also the gatekeeping ‘confirmation bias’ in favour of the orthodox (Miller, 2006), this often results in bland, ‘vanilla pudding’ publications (Ashforth, 2005). MOS critics thus have also pointed to disciplining and skewing effects of journal gatekeeping on MOS knowledge (Aguinis et al., 2020; Butler and Spoelstra, 2014; Macdonald, 2015; Macdonald and Kam, 2011; Tourish and Willmott, 2015), exacerbated through journal rankings and guides producing homogenisation and convergence towards the mainstream (positivist functionalist) orthodoxy (Grey, 2010) and a ‘one best way’ ‘research monoculture’ (Mingers and Willmott, 2013: 1051) whereby fields of practice can become marginalised (Anderson et al, 2021) and critical MOS authors have to emulate mainstream theories and methodologies to get published (Özkazanç-Pan, 2012). Moreover, such skewing critical practices around MOS journal publishing also marginalise and exclude contributions and contributors from non-Western and non-Anglophone locations and perspectives (Boussebaa and Brown, 2017; Boussebaa and Tienari, 2021; Meriläinen et al., 2008; Murphy and Zhu, 2012; Tietze and Dick, 2013) and non-white, anti-racist and anti-patriarchal theories and thinkers (Dar et al, 2020).

It is important to emphasise the geopolitical and historical aspects of these wide-ranging issues and problems. Üsdiken (2010) notes that MOS has always been dominated by the US positivist/functionalist core, but within this, the US influence and thus the pressure of convergence and homogenisation on the field have waxed and waned. The first wave of US influence happened in the 1950s-1970s and was linked to the post-WW2 aid and anti-communist efforts. This was followed by a UK-led interlude in the 1980s and 1990s, when more non-mainstream and alternative approaches briefly had more relative freedom to flourish (it is notable that this 'freedom' was still largely on Western and Anglophone terms). Yet from the turn of the millennium onwards, a second US wave arrived, this time driven by the new regime of academic performance measurement and global rankings, which placed universities, business schools, journals, and academics around the world in direct competition with each other. (I will return to MOS geopolitics in more detail in the next section.)

The growing emphasis on academic 'excellence'[8] (Ashcraft, 2017; Bristow et al., 2017; Butler and Spoelstra, 2017, 2014; 2012), narrowly defined as hitting increasingly elusive and precarious performance targets in which publications in top-ranking journals feature prominently, has produced a context in which academic success can never be permanently secured (Knights and Clarke, 2014). Arguably then, the culture of academic 'excellence' has effectively institutionalised, and perhaps should be more appropriately known as, *a culture of censure* – the dark side of the 'excellence' discourses and practices that pervade all aspects of

[8] As one of the anonymous reviewers of this paper pointed out, the etymology of the word 'excellence' is telling. 'Excellence' derives from Latin *excellentia* (superiority), from -ex + -cellere – to rise high, to tower. Etymology of other related words similarly (ab)used in neoliberal academia is equally interesting: for example, 'prestige' derives from Latin *praestigium* (illusion) and *praestigiae* (juggler's tricks), a derivative of *praestringere* (to blunt sight or mind, or literally to tie up so as to constrict). With thanks to Reviewer 1.

academic lives. In other words, the emphasis on 'excellence' implies ongoing judgement, a critique of anything that does not fit its definition, with the consequence that anything or anyone not counting as 'excellent' is simply not good enough. Journal publishing and its metrics are at the core of this culture of censure and implicated in it inextricably, as at once a key means of and an object of critique-as-censure. Much has been said in MOS, as elsewhere, about the damaging effects of this pervasive academic censure as mediated by journal publishing on the health and wellbeing of academics (e.g., Bristow et al, 2019; Gabriel, 2010; Morrish, 2019; Smith and Ulus, 2020), and in particular of those in more vulnerable positions such as in the early stages of their academic careers (Bristow, 2012; Bristow et al, 2017; Malsch and Tessier, 2015; Prasad, 2015, 2012; Ratle et al., 2020; Robinson et al, 2017).

Moreover, the political economy of journal publishing contributes to the culture of academic overwork and exploitation (Beverungen et al, 2012). Most MOS journal publishing (and thus most MOS publishing) is in the hands of commercial publishers (*Ephemera*, of course, being a notable exception). Publishers take advantage of the indispensable (and mostly paid for by universities and taxpayers) academic labour of authors, editors and reviewers as knowledge producers. The labour of reviewers in particular, essential to the contemporary publishing process, is typically unrecognised and unrewarded financially, reputationally or even in terms of university workload models and so depends on increasingly unsustainable academic citizenship practices (Dean and Forray, 2018). Commercial publishers make free use of this labour, marketize it, and then sell it back to academics at inflated prices (Beverungen et al, 2012) resulting in 'extraordinarily high' profits (Harvie et al, 2013: 235).

This setup also contributes to the skewing effects of critique as gatekeeping, whereby publishers can be seen (along with editors and reviewers) as gatekeepers too. Moreover, they are gatekeepers that are typically for-profit businesses, meaning that it is in their interests to ensure that it is marketable, sellable work that gets published. In other words, marketability, knowledge commodification, and knowledge commodities consumption are critical to the current prevailing model of commercial journal publishing. This means that journal and article performance against consumption metrics (citation indices, impact factors, and more recently altmetrics that measure media engagement) are very much in publishers' interests. As Harvie et al (2013: 230) explain, 'widely-cited journals are perceived to be higher quality, which allows for-profit publishers to charge higher prices for such journals; if widely-cited and more highly-priced journals also enjoy higher circulation (because they are widely-cited), then publishers also benefit through lower average production costs'. Publishers therefore both make use of and are implicated in the consumerisation, commodification and marketisation of HE, in tandem with the rankings industry and in the context of growing precarity and insecurity of academic labour. They are part and parcel of the academic publication game through which critique and knowledge become skewed towards the orthodox in pursuit of performance targets and metrics (Butler and Spoelstra, 2017; 2020; Macdonald and Kam, 2011, 2007; Prasad, 2012). Publishers are also gatekeepers in the sense that they control access to what is published – either at the point of sale through subscription chargers or at the point of production through author processing charges (Beverungen et al, 2013, 2012; Harvie et al, 2013). This, again, subjects gatekeeping critique to market forces that skew it in accordance with the field's specific geopolitics of knowledge, more on which below.

Critique, criticality, and critical journals

The issues around the political economy of journal publishing lead to the point that within the contemporary journal publishing system critique itself is a marketable commodity, but some forms of critique are more marketable than others. This variable marketability reflects and co-constructs the geopolitics of MOS knowledge according to both the relative sizes of the markets and what they are seen as able and willing to produce and consume. Production and consumption are particularly entangled here due to the 'double appropriation' model of journal publishing (Beverungen et al, 2012) as academics and universities are both producers (as authors, editors and reviewers) and consumers (as subscribers and readers) of what is published. The largest, richest MOS journal publishing market is the US, which is also the field's centre that is historically dominated by the positivist-functionalist mainstream, towards which other MOS geographies gravitate – the pull that has been exacerbated by the advent of journal rankings and international league tables (Grey, 2010; Üsdiken, 2010). This pull, described by Murphy and Zhu (2012: 219) as a 'confection of a 'world championship' of scholarship', puts pressure on erasing the historic differences between MOS journals originating in different geographies and traditionally favouring different approaches to both what they publish and how they publish it. Proliferating journal metrics create global performance scales, which effectively subordinate non-US journals to US ones in journal lists, rankings, indices and league tables, in which mainstream US journals tend to do better (Grey, 2010). This leads to pressures of homogenisation as it is in publishers', editors' and authors' interests to play to the dominant and 'best performing' market. By contrast, poorer parts of the world can end up being priced out of the market altogether through practices such as grossly excessive access fees or author processing charges (Harvie et al, 2013).

It is within these challenging conditions and against these gravitational forces that journals positioning themselves as 'critical' in the 'oppositional' sense of not being like the conservative core of their fields (Parker and Thomas, 2011) operate. MOS has a number of journals clearly within this category, including *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*, *Critical Perspectives on International Business*, *Culture and Organization*, *Ephemera*, *Journal of Management Inquiry*, and *Organization*. As Parker and Thomas (2011) observe, the appearance of critical MOS journals is part of the broader development of critical journals across social sciences since 1960s, and this phenomenon implies that the editors and the publishers of these journals must assume that there is some market for this sense of critical ideas. This assumption seems to be supported by an uptake of 'critical' work in some of the highest-ranked MOS journals, and not only those historically more open to non-mainstream perspectives such as European journals like *Human Relations* and *Organization Studies*, but also some of the most traditionally mainstream US journals like those of the Academy of Management (more recently especially the *Academy of Management Learning and Education*). The boundaries of 'criticality' around particular journals can be rather blurry and vary over the course of their histories, so it is arguably a fallacy to separate journals into a binary of 'mainstream' and 'critical'. Rather, oppositional criticality should more accurately be seen as a matter of extent, a spectrum in journals at a particular point in time.

Nevertheless, there are several specific concerns added into the mix for explicitly oppositionally critical journals. The first concern is the understanding that, on the one hand, the critical communities, such as notably Critical Management Studies (CMS), with which such journals co-construct the legitimacy of critical knowledge, have their own orthodoxies, conventions and historical power asymmetries (Tatli, 2012). If journals positioning themselves as critical embrace publishing processes that largely mirror those of mainstream journals (as many critical MOS journals currently do), they risk simply reproducing and institutionalising such critical orthodoxies within their fields (Parker and Thomas, 2011). Maintaining ongoing radical criticality and openness to the unorthodox therefore requires departing more radically from the beaten track of conventional publishing. *Ephemera* has done this in electing a democratic, open-access, not-for-profit publishing process run fully by an academic editorial collective, and even, somewhat paradoxically, disassociating from institutionalized versions of oppositional criticality to the point of 'removing the label [‘critical’] in order to learn the thing itself’ (Böhm and Spoelstra, 2004: 100). On the other hand, going too radical off the beaten track risks further marginalising critical journals in what is already a niche (relatively to the mainstream) ‘market’ of critique. It is perhaps not surprising that *Organization,* owned by Sage and whose publishing processes are almost indistinguishable ‘from most other elite academic journals’ (Parker and Thomas, 2011: 423) performs much better in terms of journal metrics than *Ephemera*, even though both journals explicitly eschew such metrics.

Of course, marginality can actually be taken as a measure of success for oppositionally critical journals, demonstrating that they have been true to their mission (Li and Parker, 2013). This raises interesting questions over their criticality in the sense of being essential (to what extent oppositionally critical journals are and should be essential and to whom; and whether editing themselves out of existence would count as their ultimate success). More pragmatically, it points to a fine balancing act for explicitly critical journals in steering a course between falling into the institutionalization trap (Parker and Thomas, 2011) and becoming so niche as to increasingly separate themselves from the broader communities whom they might otherwise engage and perhaps even transform.

Uncharted futures – what will be critical?

In some ways, it is remarkable how little academic journal publishing has actually changed, in the grand scheme of things, over the long centuries of its existence in terms of ‘being critical’. Like their early predecessors, contemporary academic journals still play a critical, disciplinary role in the communication and control of academic knowledge, and still make daily use of critique as a technology of intervention. It is notable that the changes that *have* occurred over the course of the centuries – the formalization of the review process accompanied by the institutionalisation of anonymity, the advent of journal performance metrics in the context of the culture of censure (a.k.a. 'excellence'), the neoliberal commodification and marketization of published knowledge and the domination of the political economy of journal publishing (at least in MOS) by commercial publishers – have all served to intensify and strengthen these two elements of 'being critical', despite the long-standing and ongoing criticisms levied against them. They have also channelled both vectors of 'being critical' increasingly inwards, towards the regulation and management of academic careers and towards critique-as-censure of academic knowledge production. Combined together in these ways, these two elements create a matrix of tensions and dilemmas for journals that go against the disciplinary grain in positioning themselves as critical of orthodoxies and conventions in terms of what and how they publish.

However, there are multiple points of pressure operating on the current system that could be leveraged to initiate more radical changes in journal publishing, and now could be the time to consider them. The Covid-19 pandemic is a moment of great crisis but also of great possibilities, as established practices, norms and conventions are questioned in all spheres of life around the world, and as development and spread of new technologies and new ways of working are accelerated. These possibilities could be grasped to bring into being as yet uncharted futures for journal publishing as part of broader reshaping of societies and the role of academia within them.

To usher in such uncharted futures, we should consider anew the two aspects of 'being critical' in academic journal publishing, as well as alternative, old and new meanings and methods of critique. Starting with being critical in the sense of being essential, this is an opportune time to ask to whom and for what we want our journals to be critical, and if, indeed, we want them to be essential at all. There are possibilities here for explicitly oppositionally critical journals to break their way out of the corner into which academic market dynamics and journal performance metrics have backed them. These opportunities come as potential for new kinds of engagement with publics and communities beyond the spheres in which journal performance metrics matter, and which can perhaps even help challenge their dominance in academia. I am suggesting here a reframing of the questions of 'relevance' and 'impact' and thus 'being essential' in more activist terms (Alakavuklar, 2020; Contu, 2020, 2018; Rhodes et al, 2018), where the focus is on being integral to social action, on being critical to progressive and emancipatory social change and transformation (Horkheimer, 2002). This would require re-emphasising critique-as-intervention in public and social life not just within but also beyond academia, where critique-as-censure at a distance does not do much to effect change but where more engaged and constructive modes of critique-as-intervention as expressed, for example, in critical participative approaches (e.g. Bristow et al., 2021; Cunliffe and Scaratti, 2017; King and Land, 2018) are required. In this regard, *Organization* has set an important precedent with its Acting Up section (Prichard and Benschop, 2018), but the very containment of activism to a section points to the current limitations of its reach. Further opportunities remain for activism to more radically transform journal publishing so that social, political and organizational action drives the very logic and purpose of journals.

As part of such more radical transformation there is an opportunity to consider the shape and fluidity of journals in light of new technologies. Academic journals have already significantly changed their shape. When I first began researching MOS journals shortly after the turn of the Millennium I observed a monthly editorial meeting, in which journal editors sat around a box of hard-copy manuscripts, which had been sent in by 'snail-mail' and were passed around the room in order for editorial decisions to be made. Twenty years later, MOS journals have almost entirely left behind all forms of hard copy. In 2020 I took part in the first online editorial board meeting of the journal in my above example (a development due to the pandemic). It was striking that significantly more people from more diverse locations were able to join the online meeting than its face-to-face equivalent at the AOM conference the previous year. In the context in which academic conference time and funding are the preserve of the privileged elite, and the environmental and health impacts of travel are increasingly problematic, there are new possibilities for more democratic, inclusive, and sustainable ways for journals to connect and foster their communities. This, in turn, could help to open up and 'un-skew' publishing processes. However, these possibilities also come with pitfalls, such as the potential for new forms of exclusion and marginalisation to be produced through different manifestations of the digital divide, sometimes embodied in practices as mundane as the choice of time zones for online meetings.

Another notable recent development that can be seen as a source of both opportunity and caution is the appearance of social media editors on editorial teams in response to the rise of new technologies that are reshaping public communications. Up till now, journals have been mainly using social media to promote their published contents, but as with activism, possibilities remain for a more radical rethinking of academic publishing as a result of these and other online technologies (Tomkins, 2020). The importance of scholarly and scholarly/public online interaction outside the traditional journal space is growing both in spread and in scope, providing new possibilities for collaboration and knowledge co-production as well as communication (Hendler, 2008). In reimagining knowledge production through time and space, is it time for academic journals to burst the banks of regular issues that have defined but also constrained them for centuries in order to develop different kinds of relationships between scholars and broader communities? New ways of being essential can open up if journals act as multifaceted, multi-located, continuous, polyvocal and multi-way conversations, through which we can learn from each other and from others who are both critical *of* the institutions and practices we want to challenge and critical *to* the causes and communities we want to support. And to turn journals into such spaces we can learn from others too – from activists reshaping societies but also from journalists engaging in different kinds of critical research and writing (Bridgman, forthcoming). Whilst this may sound utopian, some new, hybrid forms of such conversations are already developing. One example is *CMS InTouch*, a global digital platform born during the pandemic out of a collaboration between the journal *Organization* and the Academy of Management CMS Division. A hybrid between a conference and a spoken journal, *CMS InTouch* brings together critical scholars, practitioners, and activists through free and open online events, aiming to support and nurture critical communities around the world, regardless of career stage and any membership or affiliation.

There are, of course, manifold ethical and political issues to consider with opportunities offered by new technologies, especially around the controversies around major social media companies such as Facebook. Any optimism with regards to a radical transformation of academic publishing through new technologies must be tempered with ethical deliberation and critique-as-reflexivity (Cunliffe, 2003; Letiche, 2017) to channel knowledge production towards de-corporatisation and empowerment rather than new technologies becoming a new means of commercial entrapment. This leads back to the point about commercial publishers, that the political economy underpinning mainstream corporate journal publishing cannot be ignored by journals aspiring to be critical, as if the published content were all that mattered and the means through which that content is delivered were unimportant. Much insight can be gained here from the old adage that the medium is the message. The mutual criticality of academic journals and corporate publishers, where each is essential to the other needs to continue to be challenged as *Ephemera* has done over the years.

Turning to 'being critical' as a technology of intervention and particularly as critique-as-censure, it is high time to consider how to make journals less critical. Publishing is all too often experienced by authors as immensely and destructively critical, which happens along the full mainstream-critical spectrum of journals. Critique in this sense is, in Bourdieu's (1976) terms, a form of symbolic violence routinely perpetrated as part of wider processes of 'micro-terror' in academia (Ratle et al, 2020). This is (hopefully) not be the sort of criticality that 'critical' journals in particular are aiming for. A possible way to address this would be to move towards more dialogical forms of peer review (Dobusch and Heimstadt, 2019; Ross-Hellauer, 2017) that could at least partially rebalance the asymmetrical power relations in the journal publication process towards more open and democratic power dynamics, where the co-production of articles by authors, reviewers and editors is rendered visible, acknowledged, and operationalised in a transparent and reflexive manner (see also Brewis, 2018). This could help partially address the issue of high emotional costs of going through the manuscript review process, fetter some of the excessive or skewed editorial and reviewer critique, and also, as an added bonus, help protect the unwary from predatory publishing (Dobusch and Heimstadt, 2019).

More radically perhaps, we should consider what post-critical publishing could look like, and search for alternatives to critique-as-censure as the default modus operandi. Looping back to activism, the move from critique towards social, political and organisational action (Murphy et al., 2013) could be an opportunity to infuse journals with a politics of care. It is now more than 10 years since Gabriel (2010) challenged journal editors to counterbalance the ethic of criticism implicit in the publishing process with an ethic of care, but there seems to be little evidence that such a rebalancing has happened so far in a substantive way. It is time to reissue and reinforce this call for care with new urgency.

Within such new arrangements, there would still be space for critique as evaluative discourse if we treat it as an instrument of social and intellectual change, not a Kafkaesque master of processes; if we operationalise it in open and reflexive ways as subordinate to ethics of care driving social, political and organisational action, be that action a conceptual or practical engagement with oppressive realities. There would also be scope for the banner of oppositional criticality to differentiate projects from those that use critique for merely upholding the status quo, as in Burrell and Morgan's (1979) sociology of regulation, instead reaffirming critique as a sociology of radical change. This will require acknowledging academic publishing, like any other kinds of publishing, as an inescapably political activity.

There would thus also still be scope for the political role of critique in defending the unorthodox, fostering intellectual pluralism and upholding marginalism (Bristow and Robinson, 2018). For as long as there is a will to govern scholarly knowledge there would be space for critique in Foucauldian sense of questioning and challenging the extent, the means and the ways of governing, for critique as 'the art of not being governed so much' (Foucault, 1996: 384). As I write these words, the University of Leicester in the UK is busy purging anything and anyone associated with CMS from its business school. This includes targeting anyone who has published in what are perceived to be critical journals or on a topic or using an approach deemed to be critical, regardless of the journals' rankings or reputation. This is a stark reminder that the possibility for oppositional critique can never be taken for granted but also that it is still needed as much as ever.

However, in reimagining journals we should also acknowledge the need for a critique of the kind of critique that itself becomes a form of oppressive governmentality, of critique that abuses, terrorises, marginalises and excludes. At the very least we should acknowledge once again that critique is not a panacea that can miraculously address all that is wrong in the world, that not all critique is progressive, emancipatory, liberating and empowering, and that figuring out what counts as good and desirable critique is a matter of political and ethical struggle and contestation. Acknowledging that critique has its morally ambiguous politics, even within critical fields such as CMS, could allow for more transparent, open and purposeful engagement in the politics of critique, including in journal publishing.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have explored what 'being critical' has meant over the ages in journal publishing, focusing in particular on two senses of the word 'critical' – that of critique and that of being essential. I am aware that the historical narrative I have thus painted is broad-brushed and linear, with the corresponding limitations in terms of nuance and dissonance between the argument and the historiographical approach. Yet I hope that the narrative still serves its main purpose, which is to outline some of the key continuities, ruptures, and entanglements in how 'being critical' has developed over time in journal publishing, and that in doing so it performs as a history of the present in a Foucauldian sense (Garland, 2014).

This history of the present indicates that academic publishing has always been critical, both in the sense of being essential and in the sense of critique as an evaluative discourse and technology of intervention. The changes to journal publishing over the centuries have only intensified, formalised and strengthened these two aspects of 'being critical', directing their vectors increasingly inwards towards the management of academic careers and censure of academic knowledge production. So, looking to the future of academic journals, it is not so much a matter of whether we want them to be critical as how, why, of what and for whom we want them to be critical. We need to be *care*-ful and nuanced about what we want from our critiques and criticalities. For these purposes, there are many ways of being critical that we can draw on for inspiration, from the histories of journals, philosophies of critique (e.g. Foucault, 1996; Horkheimer, 2002; Kelly, 1994), to critical MOS strands such as CMS (e.g. Adler, 2001; Ashcraft, 2017; Bell and De Gama, 2018; Deslandes, 2017), and critical-reflexive research and education methodologies (e.g. Cunliffe, 2003; Letiche, 2017). The current context is an opportune moment to more radically reimagine journal publishing, and in so doing make journals simultaneously more and less critical by moving beyond critique-as-censure and towards new modes of being essential. In such a reimagining the nuance of 'being critical' needs to be negotiated through an open and reflexive politics of critique directed towards social, political and organisational action, and infused and tempered with a politics of care and marginalism.

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