

Manifesto for a new journal: Safeguarding critique in public health

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Academic publishing is in a parlous state. In the context of the rise of populist politics, the use of misinformation and the generation of mistrust in scientific expertise, the need for informed and reasoned counter-critique has never been greater. Yet, opportunities for undertaking and publishing such critique are diminishing with the increased commercialisation of academic publishing and research (Speed & Mannion 2017). There is thus a very real need to hold onto the historical gains made in establishing spaces for critical engagement. In this editorial, we reflect on this context and set out a manifesto for maintaining a space for critique in this new journal.

The onset of globalised, late- (disorganised) capitalism has been said to threaten most modern institutions, including the institution of reasoned scientific critique itself. Modernity has grown hand in hand with critique. Scientific rigour (in theory at least) has depended upon internal and external critique. Elements of critique have a long history within human communication and organisation. However, the establishment of a specifically future-oriented and ‘improving’ critical gaze was foundational to discourses of enlightenment and post-enlightenment society. These features of critique have since become synonymous with social improvement, democratisation and the rational and national organisation of society and its institutions. Traditions of scientific scrutiny, peer review and critique have been an established feature of scientific work now for several centuries, codified in the processes of academic journal publishing. These processes are now in crisis.

The academy and scientific research apparatus emerged in many countries under the shelter of national state sponsorship (Weber 1946 [1919]) – crucially including those sciences that critique state power itself. Increasingly, though, academic and scientific research establishments have become interdependent on private, for-profit organisations to fund and disseminate research, often itself commodified in various ways (Holmwood & Marcuello Servos 2019). Crucially, academic journal publishing is now almost totally in the hands of the commercial private sector, within ‘[w]hat is essentially a for-profit oligopoly’ (Buranyi 2017). Elsevier, one of the ‘Big 5’ commercial publishers, reported profits of 38% in 2022, with ‘pay-to-publish open access articles growing particularly strongly’ (RELX 2023). There has been a corresponding explosion in the number of journals, and articles, with one estimate of 5.14 million academic articles now published per year (Curcic 2023).

There has been considerable concern, from academic researchers and journal editors from most disciplines, about the knock-on effects of this growing commercialisation on the nature of scientific work, the role of academic researchers within it, and the implications for access to, and use of, their research outputs (O’Loughlin & Sidaway 2020, Larivière et al. 2015). Take open access publishing, which originated in part from concerns that publicly-funded research should be available to the public who funded it (Bell et al. 2021). This intended goal is positive, even though academic publishers potentially stood to lose income, as libraries and universities would no longer need to pay subscriptions to access

pay-walled content. Publishers have, however, found new ways to monetise content, with adverse consequences in the spread and rising costs of article processing charges (APCs) to generate revenue, to be paid by authors or their institutions. This has created increased financial burdens from ‘pay to publish’ models, which risk hardening global inequalities in access to journal publication.

A second consequence, and equally pressing, is the gradual erosion of academic control of ‘the journal’ as a forum for debate and dissemination. Commercial drivers in the for-profit sector escalate both standardisation (Horbach and Halffman 2020) and the volume of publications, to increase efficiency and maximise income from pay-to-publish models. This feeds into the hyper-production of often low-quality articles: a concern in itself. It is also a potential threat to academic freedom and critical practice. Increasingly, academic journal editors find themselves with diminishing control over their journals, with corporate, standardised workflows eroding more and more of the process (Horbach and Halffman 2020).

Whilst seemingly innocent, the offers by publishers to ease the administrative burden of editing by providing services such as managing peer review or pre-production checks also serve to distance authors and reviewers from the editorial team. Each journal becomes much like another: contact is with an outsourced administrative editor, and peer review requests feel more and more anonymous. The profit imperative, moreover, inevitably creates pressure to increase the volume of papers accepted, whether or not they are in scope or of sufficient quality. Journal editors and academic boards find themselves with less and less ability to offer a bespoke service for their authors or to control the volume of output. Their public roles become private processes.

For the Editorial Board of *Critical Public Health* (CPH) these concerns were both a practical and an intellectual preoccupation (Green et al. 2023). The Board encountered changing models of journal processes and shifts in responsibilities for the editing process, and had concerns about whether the space for critical voices in public health would be diluted, or crowded out by an emphasis on growing volume.

Critical Public Health (CPH) had spanned three decades, from its first issue in 1990 through to December 2023. The journal provided a forum and platform for a variety of voices arguing for a critical public health practice and science. CPH’s publishing aims, grounded in commitments to social justice, feminist, anti-racist and radical perspectives, were to question and confront orthodox or traditional approaches to public health. Since its inception and its beginnings as *Radical Community Medicine* (Bunton 1998), the journal had undergone a number of transformations in structure and format under the stewardship of its editors, editorial collectives and editorial boards. Throughout, it maintained and grew a loyal network of readers and contributors, firstly within the UK and then across the globe.

By July 2023, the Board felt that the tensions of maintaining fidelity to the spirit of the journal within a commercial publishing environment were no longer possible to manage. They resigned en masse, to continue the legacy of *Radical Community Medicine* and CPH within a non-profit environment. While a journal carrying the ‘Critical Public Health’ name may continue to publish articles, it is not a continuation of what was started back in 1990. That legacy will now continue here.

This year, we (the Editorial Collective) embark on a new chapter, through the launch of this new journal, the *Journal of Critical Public Health*. We take this opportunity to honour our origins, restate our purpose, and outline our manifesto and intended direction over the coming months and years. We invite readers and authors to join us in the next phase, and embrace the opportunities arising from changes and challenges in academic publishing.

Manifesto

- 1. We will defend a space for critical, robust and scholarly engagement with, against and for public health.***

Researchers and public health practitioners value a ‘go-to’ journal where they can expect to read and submit high quality, peer-reviewed critical scholarship relating to public health, health equity and social justice. We commit to maintaining a journal with this particular niche, to ensure this space continues so long as it is still valued.

2. We will maintain that space such that it is as open as possible, with recognition that ‘critical’ engagement is multiple, sometimes contradictory, and evolving.

The Editors of *Critical Public Health* were privileged to publish innovative work across a range of theoretical perspectives and topics – often ones that became mainstream in later years. Inevitably, what counts as ‘critical’ is contested and, over time, changes. We are therefore dedicated to continuing this bold, pluralistic approach and scope. To ensure this, our editorial collective will represent a range of disciplines, career stages and political perspectives.

3. We will not introduce financial inequalities in access to publishing critical scholarship.

As the funding model of the new journal evolves, we commit to ensuring that it will not introduce financial inequalities in access to publishing in the journal. Models such as Article Processing Charges (APCs) risk excluding authors from low- and middle-income countries, independent scholars, and social scientists who may be marginalised in large projects.

4. We will defend a space for critical scholarship in public health that is owned and controlled by scholars in the field.

The new journal will be published by the Critical Public Health Network (CPHN), which is open to any academic or practitioner working in critical public health who wishes to sign up. The journal’s development and quality is supported by an editorial collective on behalf of the CPHN.

5. We commit to a model of publishing that is neither oriented to profit-making nor reliant on exploitation.

As funding models evolve, we commit to ensuring that they can cover costs of the journal, without unduly exploiting the unpaid labour of editorial staff or seeking to generate profit.

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