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Large sums are going from research to publishers instead of being used to further research – What can we do about it?

Guest post written by Jan Erik Frantsvåg, Open Access Adviser at University Library of Tromsø and chairman of the board of SPARC Europe



— Jan Erik Frantsvåg
(fotograf Frans Sellies)

«Christmas is over» is part of the title of a statement from LERU (League of European Research Universities). Here, LERU laments the large sums going from research to publishers instead of being used to further research.

It is difficult to disagree with LERU in that this situation, where publishers reap huge profits from selling science's own work back to science, represents a problem for science. And a statement pointing to this problem is, of course, one small step towards rectifying it. An unacknowledged problem will stay unsolved. But how have publishers managed to get this stranglehold on science?

At the root of the problem lies how science evaluates research and researchers

It is a well-known fact that when evaluating applications for positions, for promotion and for funding, the

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prestige of the journals in which the applicant has published is used as a proxy for the quality of the research published. And for “prestige”, read “Impact Factor” (IF), at least in the fields where most major journals have an IF.

The failings of the “Impact Factor” (IF)

I shall not use much time here to lament the failings of the IF; those interested can see some of it in [this blog post](#). We could tolerate the shortcomings of the IF when using it for evaluating research quality, were there anything pointing to a strong correlation between IF and the quality of the research published – but I fail to see that such a connection has been documented.

Other expressions of “impact” or “prestige” generally have the same failings. The IF is very alluring, an exact and seemingly objective (though meaningless) number as it is. Other expressions or measures of impact/prestige could be of a more subjective character, which actually could be more meaningful in this context.

It is the quality of the (most cited) content published in the journal that gives the journal its IF

Publishers generally put IFs in a prominent place on the journal website and use it for all it is worth (and far beyond) in marketing the journal. And the publisher message seems to be that by publishing in their journal, the quality of the journal will, in some magical way, rub off on your article.

Those (lamentably few) who have sat down to learn how the IF is made will have understood that the magic actually works the other way: it is the quality of the (most cited) content published in the journal that gives the journal its IF.

I recently had a conversation with a researcher who was proud that a journal he was involved in, had doubled its IF: It turned out that this was because the editor had managed to attract some review articles to the journal –the citation pattern of the “standard” content remained roughly the same. But the journal prestige had increased dramatically.

Why do we still make researchers strive to publish in high-prestige journals?

Still, we make researchers strive to publish in high-prestige journals by making this imperative in order to get a job or tenure, promotion and research funding. This is also expressed in veiled sentences in policy documents – my own university has a goal that we “should strive to increase publication in internationally recognized journals” (my translation).

Publishing quality research in journals that maximize societal impact does not seem to be an issue. And reading expert evaluations of various fields – how often do we not read about “(un)satisfactory level of publishing in internationally renowned journals” or suchlike. How often do we see any attempt at actually evaluating if the research has been meaningful, of acceptable quality and relevant to society?

What can we do about this problem? We need to point the finger at ourselves.

As long as we continue this (mal)practice, we enable publishers owning high impact/prestige journal to create superprofit, making a fat living off the budgets of science. If we really want to do something about the profit levels of publishers, we cannot point the finger at them – they are doing their job.

It is we, who should be in control of the system, who allow this system to live on by our continuing to evaluate by numbers owned and controlled by publishers. We need to point the finger at ourselves – we cannot continue to believe in a benevolent Father Christmas who will fix things for us!

Christmas is over – so why go on believing in Father Christmas?

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