

Does the culture of science publishing need to change from the *status quo* principle of “trust me”?

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Dear *Nowotwory. Journal of Oncology* Editor,

Two recent editorials by Komorowski [1] and Ożegalska-Trybalska [2] leave readers with much to reflect on regarding the state of academic and science publishing, as well as the dynamics of the peer review process. This is because science publishing, including cancer research, is in a highly transformative – if not revolutionary – period. For authors and journals whose papers have been retracted, it is a painful period that may ultimately destroy their careers, reputations, and legends [3]. Some of that change is fueled by a desire from a segment of academia to replace the current publishing *status quo*, or the publishing oligopoly [4]. These are journals that have come to dominate fields of research, bolstered by indexing on powerful, prestigious and highly visible platforms (such as PubMed, Scopus, or Web of Science), and which have been assigned pseudo-quality metrics (the Clarivate impact factor or the Scopus CiteScore).

Collectively, these journals have operated in a vanity-based publishing culture where peer perception of academics is judged more by where they publish rather than what they publish. That *status quo* mentality, which remains the dominant “force” in academic publishing today, relies on the principle of “trust me”, i.e., publishers blindly trust editors, editors blindly trust peer reviewers and authors, and authors blindly trust editors, peer reviewers, and publishers. This triangle of metrics-indexing-“trust me” subsequently breeds unhealthy competition, where academics are then “taught” to aspire to these pseudo-academic parameters, rather than focusing

on core scientific values and principles. Such an unhealthy and unscholarly environment can breed a “publish or perish” culture and encourage exploitative and predatory practices, in which unscholarly forces – including predatory publishers – then try to attract intellect and money (article processing fees in the case of open access) away from *status quo* journals [5]. Ironically, actual or perceived “predatory” journals and publishers, despite being vilified, have managed to successfully capture a sector of the academic publishing market, using sometimes unscrupulous and untrustworthy means to attract work from academics that are blindly ingrained in the “trust me” culture. This includes peer reviewers and editors who are used as free labor [6], pulled between requests to serve the *status quo* and also potentially predatory publishers. This ultimately leads to the over-exploitation of peers and editors, who then become overburdened, exhausted, uninspired, strapped for time, and ultimately burnt out. As a result, attention to detail, ethics, and a whole host of basic scholarly principles are being ignored, neglected, or undetected in *status quo* journals during the peer review and editorial quality control. This may explain the “reviewers just don’t care anymore” sentiment that Komorowski referred to [1].

A new *status quo* is trying to replace the current oligopolistic *status quo*, sometimes forcefully, especially through post-publication critique. For simplicity sake, let us refer to that new *status quo* as members of the “open science” and “replication” movements. In these movements, there is broad recognition that the current *status quo* has failed

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academia at various levels – culturally, structurally, morally, ethically and scientifically – leading to a state of “crisis”, as is being evidenced in psychology [7], cancer research [8, 9], and public health and medicine [10]. A blanket generalization cannot be made about all *status quo* journals and publishers, and many hopefully still pursue honest scientific value as their bulwark *modus operandi*. Part of post-publication peer review involves revealing errors, fraud, and lack of reproducibility, thereby revealing fraudulent paper mill-derived research, fake authors [11], and other scientific diseases that Ożegalska-Trybalska has alluded to [2].

To some extent, the tools (plagiarism detection software, Publons, etc.) and organizations (e.g., COPE, ICMJE, etc.) that were put in place to offer protection have failed the academic community [12] because they were serving the vanity-based *status quo* scientific publishing paradigm, without appreciating that the flaw actually lies with the “trust me” culture. The lack of criminalization of extreme fraud in academic publishing [13] is leading to the existence of an ethical and legal void, as Ożegalska-Trybalska [2] alludes to, while referring to paper mills: “it is more difficult to find formal grounds to question the legality of entities” (p. 315). The fact that error and retractions are part of a trend or culture of stigmatization [14] is also not helpful to reform the culture of science publishing from one of “trust me” to one of “don’t trust anyone or anything; instead, build trust”.

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