

The price of freedom: Open access, editorial labour, and prestige in academic publishing

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Abstract: This paper discusses tensions in journal editing and management, particularly for non-fee charging open access (diamond open access) journals. Even diamond open access journals and other journals published on a non-commercial basis are subject to financial and labour costs. Because diamond open access journals do not gain income from subscriptions or article processing charges (APCs), every published paper presents additional costs. Whereas commercially published journals depend upon substantial free academic labour, unfunded or underfunded diamond open access journals depend upon both substantial free academic labour *and* free non-academic labour. This encourages editors to be selective about the kinds of submissions on which they spend their time. The importance of maintaining a journal's prestige, as measured through inclusion in bibliometric indices, incentivises further selectivity. Different kinds of papers are suitable for different kinds of journals. Even publications like *Island Studies Journal* that are radically accessible to authors and readers in diverse financial circumstances must make difficult choices when deciding what material to publish.

Keywords: academic journals, academic publishing, bibliometric indices, island studies, labour, open access, prestige

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Introduction

This short paper, written by the outgoing editor-in-chief and one of the incoming co-editors-in-chief at the end of the current editorship of *Island Studies Journal* (January 2017-June

2023), provides some insight into financial, labour, and reputational factors that influence editorial decisions, particularly in unfunded or underfunded non-fee charging open access (diamond open access) journals. We have been motivated to write this paper on account of the many conversations we have had with authors, editors, and publishing professionals over the past six and a half years. These have revealed to us common challenges facing many journals as well as common misconceptions about how academic publishing does and should work.

Most authors whose papers appear in academic journals do not give much thought to how journals maintain themselves. Nor do they think much about the bureaucratic and administrative processes by which an article is transformed from a manuscript submitted to editors to a final version of a paper published in a journal issue. Even many associate editors will lack insight into the journal's overall processes and its interactions with the wider publishing system. In this paper, we discuss only digital (rather than print) publishing, both because *Island Studies Journal* is a digital-only publication and because digital formats increasingly dominate the publishing industry.

Financial models in academic publishing

Academic publishing has costs. Some of these costs are monetary (funds paid variously by universities, government funding bodies, philanthropic institutions, and individual scholars). Other costs are covered by free labour—the work undertaken by researchers who write and review papers as well as editors who handle submissions and carry out the non-academic tasks needed to keep journals running. However much we may wish to isolate scholarship (an imagined pure pursuit of knowledge) from the messiness of business, labour, and organisational management, such separation is impossible. In academic publishing, there is always a price to pay.

Even purely online journals like *Island Studies Journal (ISJ)* involve costs. These may include costs related to information technology (subscriptions to editorial and journal management software, IT support, server hosting, web design, and day-to-day website operations, etc.), preparing manuscripts for publication (copyediting, proofreading, typesetting, etc.), paid editorial or other staff, and memberships of professional associations (Crossref, etc.). In the case of commercial or for-profit publishers, there is also the need to make a profit. The high profitability of some commercial publishers, coupled with their reliance on public funds and on free labour provided by individual scholars (as academic editors, reviewers, and authors) is a legitimate cause for concern and has prompted considerable backlash (Buranyi, 2017; Hagve, 2020; Puehringer et al., 2021). This has at times encouraged the notion that academic publishing *should* cost nothing and that, absent commercial motives, academic publishing *would* cost nothing.

But academic publishing always has a cost. The question is: Who is paying it?

Academic publishing is typically categorised within two general financial models: the subscription-based model and the open access model. Journals can be published on a

commercial or non-commercial basis within either of these models. Subscription-based publishing, also referred to as ‘traditional publishing’, involves access to journal articles only being available to those who hold subscriptions to the journals or who are based at institutions that hold subscriptions to the journals. It is also possible to purchase access to individual articles. In either case, this is a model in which the reader (or the reader’s institution) pays the costs related to publication.

Open access publishing is commonly seen as taking the opposite approach. The articles are free to access, so costs related to publication (including the need for profit, in the case of commercial publishers) need to be covered in another manner. One option is for the author (or the author’s institution) to pay an article processing charge (APC). Some journals that charge APCs are solely APC-funded open access, but especially at the largest publishers with roots in print publishing, many journals are ‘hybrid’ publications: Although the journals are fundamentally subscription based, authors (or their funders) have the option of making individual articles open access (free to read) by paying an APC. The stated aim of most large publishers and indeed many academic institutions is to leave the subscription-based model behind and move over time to a purely open access model. So-called transformative agreements between publishers and institutions seek to achieve this shift by rendering systematic the ways in which institutions pay for reading and/or publishing (Hinchcliffe, 2019). The vast majority of major journals across the humanities and social sciences are published on the basis of subscriptions, open access funded by APCs, some combination of the two, and/or transformative agreements. That is, a single journal might be funded in different ways simultaneously, depending on the identities of its authors and readers.

In the previous paragraph, we refer to ‘major’ journals. This term requires some explanation. There are in fact vast numbers of journals that are not published on the basis of subscriptions or APCs (*ISJ* is one example). However, a great many of these journals are published only intermittently, do not meet commonly expected technological or formatting standards, and/or are of such narrow regional or topical interest as to render difficult any comparison with regularly published, more broadly oriented journals. Journals can be high quality and valuable without being ‘major’. Our focus here is on journals that consciously participate in the international publishing ecosystem.

Problems with unfunded or underfunded diamond open access publishing

Island Studies Journal has the various expenses of other purely digital journals, but it does not function in accordance with any of the financial models described above. *ISJ* has been nearly a diamond open access journal since its founding by Godfrey Baldacchino in 2006. ‘Diamond open access’ means that articles are free to read, but the journal does not charge APCs or other fees to authors or their institutions. (During *ISJ*’s first editorship, authors of accepted papers were charged a nominal APC of 20 Canadian dollars. The APC was discontinued in 2017.)

Diamond open access publishing offers numerous advantages for authors and readers. As editors, we have seen the special value *ISJ* holds for particular kinds of authors and readers precisely because it is radically accessible: No one is excluded from the journal because they lack an institutional affiliation or because their institution lacks funds for subscriptions or APCs (Grydehøj et al., 2023). This matches well with the journal's aim of challenging oppressive power structures within academia (Nadarajah et al., 2022).

However, because it is diamond open access, any income that *ISJ* receives to pay for the costs associated with publishing is disconnected from readers, authors, and their institutions. For most of *ISJ*'s existence, during the time in which it had its institutional home at the University of Prince Edward Island's Institute for Island Studies (2006-2020), the journal received only very marginal levels of income (just a few hundred Canadian dollars per year), plus in-kind provision in the form of web hosting by the university library. This meant that most of the costs of publishing were placed on the journal's editorial board (especially the editor-in-chief), that is, on those scholars who were donating their time to the journal. Commercial publishers use subscription or APC income to pay professionals to undertake technical editing, article production, website maintenance, content registration and indexing, and myriad other non-academic services; at *ISJ*, these services were paid for with the time of scholarly volunteers.

Inefficiencies are inevitable when small numbers of volunteers take on tasks that would at a large company be subject to strong divisions of labour. For example, during its first 15 years of its existence, *ISJ* had access to neither commercial submission and production management systems (e.g., Clarivate's ScholarOne, Aries' Editorial Manager) nor to the volunteered technical expertise to permit use of similar non-commercial systems (e.g., OJS). This lack of access to submission and production management software became a particular problem for *ISJ* when the number of submissions to the journal increased dramatically from 2017 onward, necessitating the introduction of handling editors with responsibility for individual submissions. It quickly proved impossible for the editor-in-chief to exercise oversight over handling editors; for handling editors to keep track of author, reviewer, and editor deadlines; and for anyone to maintain the anonymity of authors and reviewers within the journal's board.

In January 2021, *ISJ* entered into an agreement for Fróðskaparsetur Føroya/University of the Faroe Islands to serve as its institutional home for a period of four years, during which time funding would be provided to the journal. This funding proved sufficient for purchasing access to commercial submission and production software as well as for paying some of the journal's copyediting expenses. However, compared with commercially published journals, at the time of writing, *ISJ*'s costs remain substantially unfunded and dependent on scholars volunteering their labour to carry out non-academic tasks. It needs to be highlighted that both commercial and non-commercial academic publishing involve massive expenditure of free academic labour; the difference is that unfunded or underfunded non-commercial publishing involves much more free *non-academic* labour.

On one level, this can be seen as a misuse of scholars' time, as they are engaged in labour outside their area of training. On another level, this can be seen as a weakening of the professional positions of those who are employed to supply non-academic services connected with academic publishing: Whenever a scholar undertakes non-academic labour that could have been contracted out to a professional, the conditions for such professionals' livelihoods are damaged, and the potential of big commercial publishers to unfairly exploit both scholars' and non-scholars' labour is heightened. Perhaps most significantly, when journal editors are required to volunteer large amounts of their time on undertaking non-academic labour, it results in journal editing becoming the preserve of scholars who are privileged in either 1) holding stable academic positions that offer considerable freedom in how they spend their time; 2) not needing to work full time or being willing to sacrifice much of their leisure time to the journal; or 3) having the ability and willingness to get junior scholars to volunteer *their* time on providing this non-academic labour.

Unfunded or underfunded diamond open access journals face another problem as well. With good planning, commercial publishers can expect to make a profit on each article published. Commercial open access publishers that charge APCs can even make a predictable profit for each article. In contrast, unfunded or underfunded journals like *ISJ* incur additional costs for each article that is published. Indeed, whereas commercial or otherwise-funded publishing operations can benefit from economies of scale (i.e., the more content they produce, the better their ability to reduce the unit cost of services related to this content), the same is not true for small diamond open access journals like *ISJ*, which benefit much less from economies of scale. For example, it takes marginally less time per article to process multiple *ISJ* articles together than to process them individually (uploading articles to *ISJ*'s website, manually entering their metadata into the Crossref system, considering a given new submission and assigning it to a handling editor, etc.). But such time savings are quite minor, and there is no sense in which a substantial increase in the number of articles to be processed improves the journal's bottom line.

Costs and editorial decisionmaking

Relationships between author and editors can be complex. There are circumstances in which authors and/or editors may be inclined to position themselves antagonistically relative to one another. An author may feel they are *fighting* to get their paper published in a journal, needing to *break down* the defences of editorial gatekeepers. As much as most editors would surely prefer to see the author-editor relationship as one of partnership rather than of conflict, there are also undeniably times in which editors feel they are *holding the line* or *defending* the status of the journal relative to authors—or simply defending their own wellbeing and mental health.

This conflict is not entirely a misunderstanding. It is in authors' professional interest to get as much of their work as possible published in recognised and respectable (prestigious)

journals. Even if an author's work is substandard, off-topic, formally inappropriate, or simply unattractive (in the sense that it will attract few readers to a particular journal), authors will still generally personally benefit from having it published. By the same token, it is in editors' professional interest to limit the kinds of material published in a journal. The publication of manuscripts that help individual authors without meeting the journal's standards (in terms of quality, topic, form, or attractiveness) simultaneously reduces the journal's prestige and produces additional costs for the journal and work for its editors. For example, authors may be frustrated by 'desk rejections' (in which an editor rejects a paper without first sending it out for peer review), but editors may wish to desk reject papers that they feel are unlikely to pass peer review, rather than expending editorial and reviewer labour on a manuscript that will probably never be published.

Furthermore, the very attributes of prestige that may encourage authors to publish in a particular journal can be placed at risk by the publication of certain kinds of papers. The identities of these 'certain kinds of papers' vary from journal to journal. There is no journal that benefits from being open to every kind or style of paper. The academic publishing ecosystem (including both commercial and non-commercial entities) benefits from having a diversity of publication outlets. An economics journal will largely publish economics papers, an anthropology journal will largely publish anthropology papers, and even multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary journals are bounded by themes (in *ISJ*'s case, that theme is 'island studies'). Some 'mega-journals' (nearly all APC-based open access) seek to do away with these boundaries and publish in any discipline and on any topic, but even among these, certain stylistic and formal limitations apply—and few such journals in the humanities and social sciences have achieved much in the way of prestige.

Bibliometrics and prestige

The issue of prestige is contentious, perhaps particularly for journals that are published on a non-commercial basis. It is widely acknowledged that dominant systems of assessing journal quality and influence are deeply flawed. Universities' and funding bodies' use of bibliometric indices (most prominently, the Scopus and Web of Science commercial indices as well as various national-level indices) can entrench inequalities between peoples and disciplines, encourage unethical publishing practices, and motivate editors to prioritise the needs of indices over the needs of authors and readers (Vanderstraeten & Vandermoere, 2021; Davies et al., 2021; Kaltenborn & Kuhn, 2004). An entire segment of commercial, APC-based open access publishing has arisen to exploit authors and funders who are being assessed on the basis of publications in 'indexed journals' but who lack access (cultural, linguistic, economic) to traditional publishers. These are problems that come from relying on bibliometric indices as measures of prestige. The San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA, 2012) influentially called for the cessation of use of journal-level metrics for assessing academic achievement.

The trouble is that—for all their flaws—the most prestigious bibliometric indices have not totally failed to serve as marks of quality within academic publishing. This mark of quality function is important because, as the number of articles and journals published worldwide has rapidly expanded, and as field-oriented (rather than discipline-specific) research has risen in prominence, it is no longer possible to expect academic or non-academic decisionmakers to be aware of all the ‘good’ journals in which scholars might publish. Bibliometrics provide a standardised (if overly simplistic) means of comparing the prestige of publications (Haefner-Cavaillon & Graillot-Gak, 2009). Ideally, decisionmakers working with funding allocation, hiring, or other areas connected with research will make well-informed decisions based on the merits of individual pieces of research. However, given the immense number of academic journals operating today and the demand for quantifiable assessment mechanisms that can be understood by non-experts, well-informed decisions are probably too much to ask for.

There are many excellent journals that are not included in certain indices. In the case of the largest and most prestigious commercial indices, high-quality journals may not be included either because they do not fulfil particular more-or-less arbitrary inclusion criteria or (especially for small, independently published journals) because the people responsible for the journals have never applied to have them included. However, these indices (particularly those of the highly selective Web of Science) have managed to exclude the worst and most predatory of journals that straightforwardly trade APCs for publication, with little in the way of editorial selectivity or peer review. That is, while a journal’s absence from any given index is not indicative of low quality, it is reasonable for decisionmakers and funding bodies to see presence on an index as indicative of high quality. The prestige-granting function of such indices is especially valuable for small open access journals such as *ISJ* since some scholars have come to associate purely open access journals with low standards and predatory practices (Hagve, 2020). For many of *ISJ*’s authors, this prestige and external mark of quality is a precondition for them submitting papers to the journal, in some cases because authors’ institutions and funding systems incentivise publication in indexed journals (Grydehøj et al., 2023). *ISJ*’s status as an indexed journal has also proved vital to its ability to receive institutional funding and in-kind support.

At the time of writing, *ISJ* is alone among the journals in the field of island studies to be indexed in Web of Science’s Social Science Citation Index (SSCI). The only other journal of island studies in Web of Science is *Shima*, a high-quality, humanities-oriented journal that is included in Web of Science’s lower-tier Emerging Sources Citation Index (ESCI) but has not yet ascended to either SSCI or the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (AHCI). *ISJ* is not objectively any higher quality than *Shima* or other journals in the field, but its prestige-granting position in SSCI has been secured through:

- 1) *ISJ*’s first-mover status and thematic focus in a small field, allowing it to occupy the island studies niche (Web of Science rewards clear placement and positioning);

- 2) *ISJ*'s decent degree of influence (as measured by Web of Science's Impact Factor calculation, which is more friendly to the social sciences than to the humanities); and
- 3) An editorial decision to ensure that *ISJ* continues meeting Web of Science's inclusion criteria and continues presenting those values (Points 1 and 2 above) that got it indexed in the first place.

Difficult decisions

ISJ's editorial decisions are determined not just by research quality but also by the costs of publishing and the importance of maintaining prestige. These aspects are interlinked. The journal's prestige is crucial for its ability to acquire the funding to cover the costs of publishing in a manner that reduces labour exploitation, and it is crucial for its ability to receive high-quality submissions. Meanwhile, because the overall cost of publishing the journal is largely determined by the number of units processed (articles submitted) and produced (articles published), the journal can only publish a limited number of articles. A radical openness to all kinds of papers would have the effect of increasing *ISJ*'s costs while also reducing *ISJ*'s prestige and thereby threatening the funding that enables the journal's exceptional financial accessibility. As a result, *ISJ* avoids publishing papers that are off-topic, do not match the journal's positioning, or otherwise clash with Web of Science's inclusion standards.

Just because a paper does not meet one particular journal's standards and positioning, it does not mean that it will not meet those of other journals. Other journals may feature different themes, styles, and priorities and seek to operate in different categories and engage with different groups of scholars. Even within the field of island studies, the different journals each have distinct personalities and hold distinct positions. There is certainly overlap between the journals in the field, but there are also papers that may be well researched and worth reading but are only appropriate for some of the journals.

ISJ has aimed—and will continue to aim—to offer broad coverage within island studies, encompassing the social sciences, the humanities, and (to a lesser extent) environment and planning. This involves requiring authors to make their work accessible to readers from different disciplines. Economists, historians, political scientists, literature studies researchers, and land-use planning scholars who publish in *ISJ* all have to adapt their writing and manner of presenting their research to meet the needs of a multidisciplinary readership. For example, the results of statistical analysis need to be introduced, explained, and discussed in a way that makes sense to non-statisticians; architects and archaeologists cannot simply present the facts or characteristics of a site but must show how these are socially meaningful; and even the 'softest' of humanities research needs to be structured and argued in a way that can be understood by social science readers. This does not mean that submissions that fail to do these things are 'bad papers'; it just means they might not be appropriate papers for *ISJ*.

In fact, *ISJ* sometimes receives manuscripts that are valuable and worth reading but that might not fit within *any* peer-reviewed academic journal. Some articles are simply unreviewable—not necessarily in the sense that they cannot be successfully anonymised for double-blind peer review but in the sense that the research and/or writing processes behind the articles do not match broadly multidisciplinary expectations for ‘research articles’. In such cases, we usually suggest to authors that their work might be better suited to a source other than an academic journal, for example, a website, blog, or literary magazine. Websites, blogs, and literary magazines may be just as high quality as academic journals but will have different formal, stylistic, and methodological expectations. Some authors are disappointed by this response: They wish to be published in a prestigious peer-reviewed journal (perhaps because this is rewarded by their current or prospective employer), but they do not wish to write articles that are suitable for peer review.

For the reasons discussed above, *ISJ* can only publish a limited number of papers. This means that editorial decisions about papers or special section proposals are sometimes influenced not just by the quality or interest of the work itself but also by the kinds of material the journal has published before. Because *ISJ* seeks to offer broad disciplinary, geographical, and topical coverage of a diverse field, the bar is raised for papers or proposals that concern an island/archipelago or approach that has recently been the subject of numerous papers in the journal. This prevents the journal from successfully nurturing specialised research areas, but the sacrifice is necessary if *ISJ* is to retain its broad appeal.

To make the point again, there are financial, labour, and reputational costs every time a journal like *ISJ* decides to process or publish a paper.

Conclusion

We value the idea of a rich and diverse publishing ecosystem that offers opportunities for the widest possible range of authors and readers. This should include both commercial and non-commercial publishers and journals and other publications that take a variety of approaches. This is part of why we feel that diamond open access journals like *ISJ*, *Shima*, *Okinawan Journal of Island Studies*, *Small States & Territories*, and *Journal of Marine and Island Cultures* are so important, providing benefits to segments of the scholarly community that cannot be replicated by subscription-based or APC-based publishing models. We nevertheless resist the notion that it is possible to publish diamond open access without costs; that there are not sacrifices to be made when operating journals on a low- or no-budget basis; and that just because diamond open access journals have chosen a publishing model that is radically accessible to people in diverse financial circumstances, they must also be radically accepting of all kinds of papers.

No journal can be everything to or for everyone. Editing a journal or managing journal publication necessarily involves difficult compromises and decisions. These become even

more difficult when money is tight and when there are overlaps between the people making editorial decisions and the people making financial decisions.

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