

ENSAYO PUBLICATION ANOMALIES AND “PAYWALL” WOES IN ACADEMIA

Prasanta Kumar Panda

Department of Humanistic Studies, Indian Institute of Technology, Banaras Hindu University (BHU), Varanasi, 221005, India. email: panpanda.hss@itbhu.ac.in

ABSTRACT. It is a boon to enhance the base in any encyclopaedias by adding new found knowledge for newer superstructures that can lead to civilizational growth. However, the newly found knowledge should be profound enough to be considered as the base. Otherwise, the superstructure of knowledge will not be of any use to meet the requirement of civilizational growth. This essay is investigative to see through the anomalies the worldwide publication web has at the present moment of history and the far-reaching negative impact it may ensure if the present-day academia is not responding to the suggestions made by the researchers in this context.

Keywords: Publishing, paywall, impact factor, academia, research, authorship.

Anomalías de la publicación y problemas con los “muros de pago” en el mundo académico

RESUMEN. Es una ventaja mejorar el fundamento de cualquier enciclopedia añadiendo nuevos conocimientos encontrados para nuevas superestructuras que puedan conducir al crecimiento de la civilización. Sin embargo, el nuevo conocimiento encontrado debe ser lo suficientemente profundo como para ser considerado como un fundamento. De lo contrario, la superestructura del conocimiento no va a ser de ninguna utilidad para cumplir con el requisito para el crecimiento de la civilización. Este ensayo es de naturaleza investigativa para ver a través de las anomalías que la web de publicación mundial tiene en el momento actual de la historia y el impacto negativo de largo alcance que se puede prever si la academia actual no responde a las sugerencias hechas por los investigadores en este contexto.

Palabras clave: Publicaciones, muros de pago, factor de impacto, academia, investigación, autoría.

We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.

Albert Einstein

Nobody needs to justify why they “need” a right; the burden of justification falls on the one seeking to infringe upon the right, but even if they did, you cannot give away the rights of others because they are not useful to you.

Edward Snowden

In the last four decades, publication has been considered routine work for academicians worldwide in institutions of higher studies. Although only a small part of the lot has the insight and attitude to do something new and deserve publication is a known fact. Even then, the regulating authorities demand it as a matter of routine to enrich their data bank with numbers and not quality. The scenario is one step more irrational when they decide which quality publications the academicians should publish in. The situation becomes alarming if any designated authority fixes a law one can only publish papers in some classified (read indexed with impact factor) journals to get the benefit of it in getting jobs, and promotions amounts to nothing less than a designed monopoly of some journal groups “nexus and the authorities” selective blindness about it without any forethought.

Such a situation becomes ridiculous when the designated authorities in the form of ministries belonging to countries whose educational institutions are posted very low in the ethical index of the

worldwide surveys by credible organizations force it on their academicians. I believe it is equivalent to a law that dictates something akin to directing people to step into only some branded hotels to dine even when they do not have their choice of food available, nor can they pay the price for the food served there. Some readers may instantly feel that I have trivialized a rather grave matter of concern for most academicians if not all. However, this analogy stands grave when one transposes the situation to the fact that some of the branches of knowledge included in the higher academics (universities or autonomous institutions founded by masters in the concerned domains) do not have any or have very few journals in the classified category with impact factor value (i.e., Visual Arts, Performing Arts, Indology, Indigenous Cultural Studies, Vernacular Languages, Tribal Studies, etc.). Therefore, it is not possible for the academicians belonging to these branches of knowledge, selected as their area of research, to approach such indexed journals for publication and, as a result, be unable to satisfy the requirements for appointment or promotion.

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When I checked the situation, I found that even a branch of knowledge bases such as English as a Language and Literature in English, which are widely found in all kinds of curricula, including Science and Technology (of course not in Medicine, Agriculture, and Management without any understandable reason), has hardly half a dozen journals, and the number of faculty who wish to publish in them may sound highly absurd by all parameters of ratio. Another absurd practice in vogue is that some institutional authorities have fixed SCI (Science Citation Index)-listed journals as hallmarks even for nonscience knowledge domains such as English literature or history. In my further investigation, I found that such indexed journals listed in SCI do not have any scope for many areas researched in the broad spectrum of “literary studies” or in the interdisciplinary areas of history and anthropology. Now SCI is expanded, and therefore it has become SCIE, but with the same nomenclature and does not have room for the diversity of the disciplines in humanities. Readers must have realized by now the validity of my analogy as a matter of scientific outlook and not an outcome of fancy.

The practice of giving credits to publications, if taken as a whole in the last five decades, makes a bleak picture of unhealthy practices that have crept into the profession (which Jacques Derrida has referred to in the *Future of the Profession* and rightly so because no one denies that the unfair practices in academia will have a further negative impact on all kinds of professions in future) by and large is an indisputable truth (Derrida, 2005). The other side of the story, the assumption that all the good faculties in higher academics are good teachers and promising researchers, is disputable. It will remain so forever, although unlikely to be acknowledged by some who favor the present condition to persist and others who think they cannot do anything about it.

The fact checks invariably point out that such an assumption imposed upon academia has given rise to a questionable and even derogatory “high culture” of cunning plagiarism of all sorts. Guest authors and ghost authors are only pleasant surprises for the non-authors. The academic fronts which bear the brunt, have no option to reject such a practice even if they know the truth. This is noted and indicated in their writings on the topic by public intellectuals as a reason behind the abysmal rise of papers published, academically being designated as papers by esteemed reviewers through their visible signatures available to the journals and the editors. (One acquainted with academia knows that almost all of the reviewers are either not paid or underpaid and often do not have time to go through many papers, even flippantly). Let us consider the intended outcome of such papers in the domain of knowledge bases. They are fixed by a single standard parameter of enhancing knowledge in a specific manner, which means that the scrutiny of intellectual fervor is either nonexistent or very low in most cases. This can be verified by the fact that

the number of publications of research scholars, conjointly bearing the names of their guides/supervisors as coauthors, remains largely a matter of a game with arbitrary rules to aggrandize the persons concerned and the institution’s name in question, and not imbued with academic spirit. Eve Marder succinctly presents this in the article “Who Should Be the Authors of a Scientific Paper?” She writes, “It was not uncommon for the papers from Ph.D. theses to have just one author because a Ph.D. thesis was meant to be an independent piece of work.” However, later on, it became the opposite, she regrets: “in the mid-1970s, it became almost unheard of having single-authored papers from students and postdocs.” She wonders, “at a time when journals are being more specific about author contributions in papers, and institutions require researchers to attend courses on responsible conduct in science that often include discussions about authorship?” (Joseph, 2021).

I want to continue my overtures with the insightful quote from the book by Derrida, which I have already referred to earlier: “The university professes the truth, and that is its profession. It declares and promises an unlimited commitment to the truth. No doubt, the status of and the changes to the value of truth can be discussed ad infinitum (truth as adequation or truth as revelation, truth as the object of theoretico-constitutive discourses or as poetico-performative events, and so forth). However, these are discussed, precisely, in the University and in departments that belong to the humanities.” This inadvertently raises the question: are we able to manage ourselves any close to this truth about our existence as academicians? Another question that one can add here is that: do we face this in academia just because we are not giving any priority that humanities deserve? In other words: Are we professing truth in our profession?

Lest my readers feel that I am blowing things beyond their explosive content about truth in science research, I am citing a four-year-old published article by Julian Kirchherr in *The Guardian*, titled “Why we can’t trust academic journals to tell the scientific truth.” An apt quote that can summarize what I wish to project as truth in academia at the present moment can be this: “The idea that the same experiment will always produce the same result, no matter who performs it, is one of the cornerstones of science’s claim to truth. However, more than 70% of the researchers who took part in a recent study published in *Nature* have tried and failed to replicate another scientist’s experiment. Another study found that at least 50% of life science research cannot be replicated. The same holds for 51% of economics papers”. Joel P Joseph, in *Wire Science*, gives evidence for this estimation in the following manner: In 2016, a team tried to reproduce 18 economics studies published in two leading journals and failed to replicate seven. In 2018, a few others attempted to replicate 21 papers in social sciences published in *Nature*, and *Science* found that only 13 studies held up. Again, in both instances,

there was evidence that the original findings could have been overstated (Joseph, 2021).

Furthermore, I may extend this argument by quoting the following: “The solution to this crisis is not to abandon performance indicators such as the number of papers published in high-impact journals. Universities are large and complex organizations and require indicators to manage themselves. However, overreliance on performance indicators neglects that scientific discovery is not only the result of academic competence but also of pure chance” (Kirchherr, 2017). In this context, taking humanities into account, one can genuinely think of ‘articles’ as evidence of scholarship, not what is known (and in practice) as ‘research papers’, which invariably demand some known knowledge creation. One can find ample examples in this regard by scanning the most reputed journals where the emphasis is inadvertently not given to the addition but to what is revisited/reviewed differently.

The following quote can highlight yet another gray area about the so-called ‘top’ journals, as suggested rightly by Mason and Merga in their article published in *Wire Science*: “The ‘top’ journals in any discipline are those that command the most prestige, and that position is largely determined by the number of citations their published articles garner. Despite being highly problematic, citation-based metrics remain ubiquitous, influencing researchers’ review, promotion, and tenure outcomes. Furthermore, bibliometric studies in various fields have shown that the “top” journals are heavily dominated by research produced in and about a small number of “core” countries, mainly the US and the UK, and thus reproduce existing global power imbalances within and beyond academia (Mason and Merga, 2021).

The three-dimensional tunnel of impact factor, indexed publications, and unpaid reviewers/editors for appointment and promotion recently has some light at its end: “Impact factor abandoned by Dutch university in hiring and promotion decisions”. The faculty and staff members at Utrecht University will be evaluated by their commitment to open science (Woolston, 2021).

Let me add to the truth that Derrida has propounded in one more count that Einstein has indicated in his writings about scientific communication across borders: “Academic and scientific research needs to be accessible to all. The world’s most pressing problems, such as clean water or food security, deserve to have as many people as possible to solve their complexities. However, our current academic research system has no interest in harnessing our collective intelligence. Scientific progress is currently thwarted by one thing: ‘paywalls’ ” (Schmitt, 2019). It needs no elaboration here that this ‘paywall’ is an extension of the index and impacts factor of our creation as a replica of the matrix-obsessed ‘for-profit’ commercial establishments (commodification of education under

the pressure of the money market) and not an accountable demeanor of a “not-for-profit” reputable worldwide web of academia. This atmosphere of “Publish or perish” has changed drastically to “pay and publish and not perish” (however, in the “paywall” system, there is no guarantee of it; as you will find it in this article later). A somewhat vulgar dictum based on the foreground we have created thus far as a community forces me to refer to what is known as Article Processing Charge (APC). It is not surprising that this fee is paid in some cases by private institutions directly and public institutions indirectly to keep their rank intact from year to year.

We cannot be complacent about a significant number of publications only to cater to the need of the ranking of our institution at the cost of throwing away all the ethical issues involving world good and the spirit of will to truth into an ever-widening big gutter called predatory journals. In the third world, they are the masters of paper publication. One example can be traced from *Fake Science* part II: published in *Indian Express*: “Most of these journals exist online and are operated by companies based across the city, including the posh Banjara Hills, but flaunt addresses from abroad on their websites, mostly in the US and UK” (Yadav, 2018).

Keeping a hawk’s eye on the value given to faculty for international publications, some predatory journals thrive. For example, *Openventio*, with a US office, publishes 40 journals from Hyderabad, with an “article processing charge” ranging from \$127 to \$1,027 depending on the article’s length and author’s country. *Scientific Open Access Journals* runs 24 journals, with an “article processing charge” of \$500 for 20 of them.

On the other side of the story, journals repute to charging the subscribers and the individual readers without any ethical consideration. It is claimed by the intellectuals that “The extortionate prices charged [from the readers] by many of the monopolistic private-sector publishers, such as Elsevier and Springer, need to be reduced”. Furthermore, the peer review system, which is at the heart of the maintenance of the quality of scientific research and publication, needs to be strengthened. A significant reduction in the output of articles will make these reforms much easier (Altbach and de Wit, 2018).

An article published by Raphael Tsavkko-Garcia in *The Bookseller* will make it clear for those skeptical about my contention: “I wrote the article, but I simply could not access it nor anyone from my university that might be interested in a similar topic. I spoke to a few colleagues who could also not access it but rather had to pay large sums of money to read it and cite it which is the academic’s main goal. Therefore, I managed to publish, but I would ultimately perish because no one in my area seemed to be able to read it” (Tsavkko-Garcia, 2021).

This is why in 2011, a Robin Hood in academia, Alexandra Elbakyan, created Sci-Hub, the world's largest free repository of pirated scholarly articles in science. Of course, with an ethically responsible position in the public domain, one may have the compunction to declare Alexandra an ultimate benefactor. However, in all sound sensibility in private, all the intellectuals will agree that she has demolished the great "Paywall" and, to a great extent, made "most are equal" and not "some are more equal than others", at least in the worldwide academia of science and technology. Additionally, another web is giving respite from the great wall to be breached; unpaywall.org, created by Jason Priem and Heather Piwowar of Impactstory in 2017, is a plug-in tool for individual users to access and find Open Access articles in 50,000 institutions across the world. (Dhakal, 2019).

To understand why people like Alexandra Elbakyan, Jason Priem, and Heather Piwowar ventured in this direction, let us examine the argument about the cost of publishing and the explanations put forth by the publishing giants, and their validity in a situation when individuals who want to use JSTOR must shell out an average of \$19 per article. The academics who write the articles are not paid for their work, nor are the academics who review it. The only people who profit are the 211 employees of JSTOR. Sarah Kendzior writes, "The high price is designed to maintain the barrier between academia and the outside world. Paywalls codify and commodify tacit elitism" (Kendzior, 2012). This is reflected in another report worthy of production here for evidence. In its investigative study, to chastise such publishers, Deutsche Bank concludes: "We believe the [Elsevier] adds relatively little value to the publishing process. We are not attempting to dismiss what 7,000 people at [Elsevier] do for a living. We are simply observing that if the process truly were as complex, costly, and value-added as the publishers protest that it is, 40% margins wouldn't be available" (Mayyasi, 2013). This indicates that the elite publishing world of journals is fraught with high-profit making and indifference to the ability of the individual researcher's capacity to pay and publish or even read.

Another problem is pointed out in the following article published in University World News written by Philip G. Altbach and Hans de Wit: "No one knows how many scientific journals there are, but several estimates point to approximately 30,000, with close to two million articles published each year" (Altbach and de Wit, 2018). However, this situation can be partly redeemed if we are obliged to listen to what Ernest L Boyer argued in his 1997 book, *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities for the professoriate*: that the evaluation of academic work should include all aspects of the responsibilities of the academic profession and that the large majority of professors who are not employed in research-intensive universities should be evaluated for their teaching and service and not for research (Boyer, 1997).

Then, why such a nefarious process is continuing is explained by Alex Mayyasi in his post "Why is Science Behind a Paywall?" in the following words: "A history of publication in prestigious journals is a prerequisite to every step on the career ladder of a scientist. Every paper submitted to a new, unproven OA [open access] journal is one that could have been published in heavyweights such as Science or Nature. In addition, even if a tenured or idealistic professor is willing to sacrifice in the name of science, what about their Ph.D. students and coauthors for whom publication in a prestigious journal could mean everything?" (Mayyasi, 2013).

Forgive me for using someone else's words to conclude, as I do not wish to paraphrase and put it in any better polite manner: "...accept that the demand to publish, publish, publish doesn't actually serve any real public interest and stop putting so much pressure on academics to churn out papers? Some research requires time to produce any meaningful result. Einstein would never have won tenure – or even survived the brutality of the postdoc period today". Additionally, without any cynicism, can we simply forget what a giant had acknowledged about other giants in science? "If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants," none other than Sir Isaac Newton. If we can afford it at the cost of paywalls, we will probably lose many giants in the future.

We have by now already reached a stage in academia that can be summarized as a number crunchers' paradise (matrix-oriented hallmarks for the hall of fame). Let us realize it fast and not allow it to be a system governed by the numbers and for the numbers alone. Even if numbers are necessary, they should not give the spirit behind the numbers a miss. We now need imagination, not knowledge about the display of our knowledge. Einstein had cautioned about it: "The true sign of intelligence is not knowledge but imagination." We are at a time when we must show that we have truly understood the spirit of academia regarding knowledge of the present, intelligence to manage it, and imagination to frame it properly for the future.

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