A Peer-Reviewed Scholarly Article

Petar Jandrić[1,2]

Introduction

Academic publishing is central to knowledge development. In words of Richard Feynman (1969: 320), '[e]ach generation that discovers something from its experience must pass that on, but it must pass that on with a delicate balance of respect and disrespect, so that the [human] race does not inflict its errors too rigidly on its youth, but it does pass on the accumulated wisdom, plus the wisdom that it may not be wisdom'. Since 1665, when Henry Oldenburg founded the first modern scientific journal, *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, this delicate balance is achieved through various peer review practices. Despite their long history, today's peer review practices are often opaque. According to Jackson et al. (2018: 95–96), peer review 'has become one of the most mysterious and contentious academic practices, causing anguish for many academics—both reviewers, and those whose work is reviewed—and sometimes more distress than is necessary'.

This opacity and mystery are somewhat justified by diversity of peer review practices across scholarly publications, disciplines and genres (journal article, book, book chapter, project report, white paper and so on). Peer review is formally taught only tangentially in research method courses, and junior scholars are expected to pick up the research culture of their discipline as a part of their own knowledge formation and development as researchers. Those working with mentors less oriented towards publication and those working

✉ Petar Jandrić
  pjandric@tvz.hr

[1] Zagreb University of Applied Sciences, Zagreb, Croatia

[2] University of Wolverhampton, Wolverhampton, UK

across disciplines and research cultures need to figure out sets of invisible rules relating to academic publishing largely on their own; this process can easily take years and is also supported, or not, by the networks scholars belong to.

This article aims at lifting some mystery and distress related to academic publishing. The article outlines a complete life cycle of a double-blind peer-reviewed scholarly article from choosing the right journal to the article's post-publication impact. It suggests some good practices for authors, reviewers and editors. It briefly reviews key issues related to the political economy and epistemology of academic publishing. Finally, it outlines attempts at creating a new postdigital knowledge ecology in *Postdigital Science and Education*. While the presented life cycle of a double-blind peer-reviewed scholarly article is based on the example of *Postdigital Science and Education*, these practices are fairly standard for journals across the humanities and social sciences and may be of interest to scholars in diverse fields and disciplines.

The Double-Blind Peer-Reviewed Scholarly Article: Complete Life Cycle

This section presents a complete life cycle of a scholarly article published in *Postdigital Science and Education* from the perspective of the journal's founder and Editor-in-Chief (in further text: editor). The presentation mixes journal standards, scholarly insights and hands-on experience developed through publishing more than 200 articles (and rejecting many more) in the period between 2018 and 2020.

Choosing the Right Journal

Most large publishers offer guidelines for choosing the right journal for an article. These guidelines usually revolve around journal descriptions and already published papers, suggesting that authors should submit to a journal which publishes work similar to theirs and which caters to their scholarly community. However, these principles are often overshadowed by political economy. Most academics require publications for getting jobs, promotions and other forms of social and economic recognition; in institutional and governmental policies, these requirements translate into metrics. At most universities and institutes in continental Europe, China and many other countries, relevant articles need to be listed in one or another database (Scopus, Web of Science, Current Contents and others); other countries have their own metric systems, such as the UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF) which was established to provide accountability for public investment in research, demonstrate benefits from this, provide benchmarking information and inform selective allocation of funding for research; elsewhere, metrics are left to individual institutions. Whatever the metric, publishing many articles in highly ranked journals with high impact factors (IF) is generally the best way to move forward within global academia.

These metrics-obsessed practices are problematic for many reasons related to nature of research measurement (see Jandrić 2020a). Furthermore, these practices strongly shape the global publishing landscape. Before they become eligible to apply for inclusion in major databases, new journals need 2–5 years of continuous publication; at the same time, the majority of authors need to publish in older journals which are already listed in same databases. This clearly brings young(er) journals into an

unfavourable position (see Jandrić 2020a) and maintains existing power relationships. The good news is that indexing is not cast in stone. Once a new journal gets indexed, most mainstream databases will index all articles backwards in time. For those authors who can afford a few years of waiting, it makes sense to publish in new journals which have the potentials for long-term success. When the new journal gets indexed in databases and achieves a steady flow of incoming submissions, published articles will be built into the foundations of the new community.

Before Submission

Some journals do not encourage direct communication between authors and editors before article submission. Other journals, such as *Postdigital Science and Education*, support a more dialogical approach and encourage authors to contact editors with their article ideas as early as possible. This dialogical approach is based on a deep conviction in value of (postdigital) dialogue (Jandrić et al. 2019) and the collective nature of knowledge-making processes exemplified in the trialectic between we-think, we-learn and we-act (Jandrić 2019); it results with the critical and innovative nature of the *Postdigital Science and Education* publication route which is transparent, democratic and negotiable. In any case, authors need to make sure that their article is a good fit for the journal: either through an in-depth examination of journal description and already published articles, or through direct inquiry.

Before submitting their papers, a surprisingly large number of authors do not read the journal description, (recent) articles or even submission guidelines. In many cases, this results with a mis-match with the journal's expectations followed by the editor's immediate rejection of the paper before peer review (the so-called desk rejection). To avoid desk rejections, authors are expected to follow the journal's guidelines and standards before submission. This expectation brings additional work for authors, especially if their article was already rejected from one journal and now needs to be reformatted for submission in another journal. However, it is also in their own interests to be published in a journal that fits well with the field of knowledge in which they are writing. Additionally, journal editors are dealing with hundreds of incoming articles per year; in most cases, they just do not have the capacity to deal with material which may have some potential but requires a lot of work to bring that potential out into the open.

Double-Blind Peer Review

All submissions to *Postdigital Science and Education* undergo the following procedure:

1. When authors submit their article, the production team performs an admin check to make sure that the submission is fully blinded and compliant to journal standards.
2. When the admin check is complete, papers are assigned to the editor. The editor has access to all information about the article and its authors, including results of the admin check and many additional informational services: within one or two clicks, it is possible to see an authors' publishing history, incoming citations to an authors' work and so on.

3. The editor decides whether the submission is suitable for review. Currently, more than 70% of submissions to *Postdigital Science and Education* receive desk rejections. Good reviewers are hard to find, and their time should not be wasted on obviously irrelevant or substandard work. Common reasons for desk rejection include an article's mis-match with the journal, inappropriate length and/or argumentation, poor language and so on.

4. For promising submissions, the editor chooses appropriate reviewers and sends out review invitations. This is a critical point in the peer review process, as appropriate reviewers can significantly improve the work while mis-matched reviewers can make important errors. Some journals allow authors to suggest potential reviewers, but in *Postdigital Science and Education*, the choice of reviewers is fully with the editor.

5. Potential reviewers receive email invitations with blinded information about the submission and decide whether they will review it. At this stage, a reviewer's swift response is hugely appreciated. While it is completely fine to reject the review for any reason, sending a delayed negative response to a review invitation is frowned upon because it causes unnecessary delays.

6. As soon as they agree to a review, reviewers receive a confirmation email with a deadline for submitting their reviews.

7. When both reviewers submit their reports, the editor makes a formal decision about the submission. Common available decisions are Accept, Accept with Minor Revisions, Accept with Major Revisions and Reject. If reviewers' reports are roughly in agreement, the decision is made immediately.

8. Reviewers' reports about the submission sometimes strongly disagree. The most common example of strong disagreement is when reviewer 1 suggests minor revisions and reviewer 2 suggests rejection. In such cases,[1] the editor reads the article and writes up own review. The editor then emails all reviewers and shares all reviews amongst them. After a detailed and democratic email exchange, the group consensually makes the final decision about the submission.

9. Articles get immediately accepted only exceptionally—in more than 200 articles published in *Postdigital Science of Education*, such cases can be counted on the fingers of one hand.

10. The number of post-review rejections depends on the rigour of desk rejection. Stricter criteria for desk rejection give more power to the editor, yield less post-review rejections and put less strain on reviewers, but may inadvertently weed out valuable articles. Looser criteria for desk rejection give more power to the community, yield more post-review rejections and put more strain on reviewers, but may result in more diversity of accepted articles.

11. Together with their revised article, authors need to submit the response to reviewers which details all revisions. Upon resubmission, the editor gets access to the revised article and the response. In cases where authors have appropriately and clearly addressed reviewers' comments, the editor may decide to accept the article without further review. This usually, but not exclusively, happens with articles accepted with minor changes.

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[1] This practice is specific for *Postdigital Science and Education* and cannot be generalized; the choice of strategy for resolving disagreement between reviewers is fully at the discretion of the editor.

12. Many revised articles require more work. The editor can write their own feedback
     and request one more round of revisions or initiate the second round of peer
     review.
13. In the second round of peer review, the editor can invite previous reviewers, select
     new reviewers or a combination thereof. New reviewers will usually be selected if
     original reviewers have become unavailable, or if the revised article would benefit
     from a third or fourth perspective. In both cases, the article goes back to step 5.
14. When the article is finally accepted by all reviewers, the editor may request one
     more round of technical revisions (removing anonymity, applying house style
     formatting, and so on).
15. Finally, the editor accepts the article and sends it to production.

Production

Production consists of the following steps:

1. Formatting and copy-editing, where production enters the manuscript into the
    journal template, adds author details, adjusts heading styles, cross-checks refer-
    ences and so on. At the end of this stage, the corresponding author receives article
    proofs for inspection. Proofs usually contain author queries about various issues
    such as missing and incomplete references, which need to be addressed before
    submission. In most journals, the corresponding author will receive only one set of
    proofs before an article's publication.
2. In the case of extensive changes, the corresponding author may request to re-proof
    the revised article. Most journals will support such requests, but will not encourage
    them, so information about requesting one more round of proofs may be hidden
    somewhere in small print. As a rule of thumb, the safest way to ensure an
    opportunity for one more round of proofs is to email the editor.
3. After receiving corresponding author's final approval, the article is published
    according to journal's publication schedule.

After Publication

In many mainstream journals, accepted articles are immediately published as Online
First. Such articles are fully citable using their digital object identifier (DOI) but are not
assigned to journal volume and issue and have no page numbers. With time, Online
First articles are assigned to volumes and issues according to the journal's publication
schedule, at which point they acquire the remaining bibliographical information.

It often happens that Online First articles published in one year get assigned to
journal volume and issue published in the next year. For instance, this article was
published in 2020, and now it sits in *Postdigital Science and Education*, Volume 3,
Issue 1, 2021. An Online First article may get mirrored in various institutional and non-
institutional repositories and remain there unchanged long after its inclusion into
journal volume and issue. Once other authors start quoting the article, this may lead
to a confusion—depending on the accessed version, researchers may quote the article

using two different years of publication. Based on DOI, databases from Web of Science through Scopus to Google Scholar routinely recognize different versions as the same article; yet, this recognition is prone to mistakes. Therefore, it is always best to reference the latest version of the article after its inclusion to journal volume and issue—for instance, this article needs to be referenced as Jandrić (2021).

As a rule of thumb, published scholarly articles cannot be changed. The only acceptable reasons for change are serious production errors, and serious errors of fact, which are addressed by issuing a separate Correction document (sometimes also called *Erratum*, *Corrigendum* and similar). For authors, published scholarly articles are almost impossible to withdraw. However, published articles can be retracted by the author or publisher in cases such as serious omissions or errors, fraud, misconduct, data provenance and the like. 'Although retractions are relatively rare, the retraction process is essential for correcting the literature and maintaining trust in the scientific process.' (Fang and Casadevall 2011: 3855).

Impact

After publication, journal articles get a life of their own in search engines and databases. Depending on research contributions, popularity of the theme, authors' standing, journal's popularity, visibility, impact factor and a myriad other factors, some articles immediately receive a lot of attention while others get quickly forgotten. Many journals have dedicated services which help authors to promote their articles; some common strategies include advertising in social networks, placing links to recently published articles in email signatures, arranging public talks, recording video abstracts and so on. Yet, with time, the most popular articles will be those with the highest number of citations. Highly cited articles score higher in search engines and databases, which make them more visible; more visible articles are read and quoted, by more authors. Articles with little or no citations score lower in search engines and databases, which make them less visible and less quoted.

As a result, the academic article landscape consists of a small number of highly quoted articles and a vast majority of articles with little or no impact. In many cases, high-quoted articles are indeed of better quality than low-quoted articles. However, article popularity and impact, measured by the number of clicks and incoming citations, are not a measure of article quality.

Political Economy of the Scholarly Article

Academic articles are amongst the smallest units of academic knowledge that can be turned into a commodity—packaged, sold and delivered online. During past decades, this has brought about an oligopoly of large academic publishers, where five for-profit companies (Elsevier, Springer, Wiley-Blackwell, Taylor and Francis and Sage) own more than half of all existing databases of academic material and sell their content at high prices (see Jandrić 2017: 256). Administrative and technical staff are on publishers' payrolls; yet, the primary creators of content—editors and reviewers—remain at their places of employment such as research institutes and universities or work outside of traditional academic institutions.

Some publishers pay small honorariums to journal editors, but article reviewers do not get paid anywhere. As a result,

> [g]lobal neoliberal academia, in cooperation with global for-profit publishing companies, has created a model of value extraction in which the fruits of predominantly publicly funded labour (research) and an increasing percentage of unpaid labour (editing, reviewing) is packaged in expensive books and journals and then sold back to their producers. (Jandrić and Hayes 2019: 385)

Commenting on this model of value extraction, Michael Peters has ironically dubbed the scholarly article as 'a dirty little industrial machine' (in Jandrić 2017: 52).

At present, authors wishing to publish with mainstream publishers can typically choose between the traditional reader-pays model, the author-pays Gold Open Access model (full open access), the Green Open Access Model (where authors can archive article pre-prints and post-prints but not the published article itself) and a few other less popular models (see Hubbard 2018). Much has been written about problems of the reader-pays model of academic publishing, including its negative impacts to knowledge production and social development (Jandrić and Hayes 2019; Peters et al. 2012). However, popular alternatives are also far from ideal. It is expensive to publish an author-pays Gold Open Access article, so publication charges are usually paid by an author's institution. Many prestigious institutions have exclusive publishing contracts with mainstream publishers, but smaller and poorer institutions often cannot afford to support Open Access publication for their employees, and independent scholars are completely out on their own. To add insult to injury, published author-pays Open Access articles attract more views and more citations than traditional reader-pays articles (Eysenbach 2006). Consequently, authors working at richer and most prestigious institutions get even more popularity and citations, while authors working at poorer and less prestigious institutions, and independent authors, get even less popularity and citations. This contributes to different divides between the rich and the poor, the Global North and the Global South and so on, and negatively impacts knowledge development as a whole.

Authors wishing to escape the large publishers' oligopoly may turn to an increasing number of independent journals which obtain external funding, and/or operate on voluntary basis, to support full Open Access without charging author fees. However, these journals are few and far in between and cannot cater to all publishing needs. Furthermore, as the academic oligopoly of large academic publishers includes ownership of relevant databases, independent journals have a slim chance of getting listed. Thus, articles published in independent journals are often not recognized in terms of impact for getting jobs, promotions and other forms of social and economic recognition. Predatory journals, which publish sub-standard work without proper review to make money on fees, have also become commonplace. Academic publishing is a tough environment, where winning scholars and institutions take almost everything while a large and rapidly growing majority fights over their leftovers.

This situation has been extensively critiqued by various groups from scholars themselves to hacker-activists (see Jandrić and Hayes 2019). Since 2012, Michael

Peters has gathered these critiques in an over-arching concept of knowledge capitalism.

> Knowledge capitalism increasingly envelopes universities in the digital circuits that make up an emerging global system and bypass the state and its capacity to monitor, regulate or police the historical moment of 'financialization.' It is not just a matter of changing science funding regimes or science paradigms but rather the development of a parallel set of digital technologies and processes 'shared' between universities and multinational info-utilities and across private and public sectors in a historically complex skein of incubation, innovation and privatisation. (Peters in Peters and Jandrić 2018: 239)

Unsurprisingly, trends and problems associated with knowledge capitalism extend all the way to nature of produced knowledge.

The Scholarly Article and Knowledge

Even a quick glance at the realities of the double-blind peer review process shows the absurdity of claims over its neutrality. From the first contact between the author and the journal, to the very last correction, the article is at almost complete mercy of the editor, and to a lesser extent, of the reviewers. Publishers take pains to develop complex online submission systems that ensure anonymity in double-blind peer review. Yet, authors' identity in many cases cannot be concealed from a knowledgeable reviewer—in smaller academic niches where everyone knows everyone, it is often impossible not to recognize words written by close associates or competition. Editors can deliberately abuse their position in various ways such as giving unfair desk rejections, assigning 'tough' or mismatched reviewers, favouring certain authors and so on. Reviewers can deliberately abuse their position by rejecting or endlessly returning articles written by their competition. Even if we assume honesty and best intentions of all editors and reviewers, their biases and preferences are unavoidable.

In our age of viral modernity, where information systems increasingly exhibit certain viral behaviours including uncontrolled growth (see Peters and Besley 2020; Peters, Jandrić, and McLaren 2020), the publish-or-perish culture results in significant article deluge. However, this problem is far from new. Already in 1986, Don Swanson coined the phrase 'undiscovered public knowledge' focusing to insufficient collaboration across disciplines. His argument was that '1) there's more stuff than can be reasonably read; 2) disciplinary specialisation exacerbates the problem; 3) as a result, when we ask money for "new research", we may end up reinventing the wheel' (Fuller and Jandrić 2019: 200). These days, however, the problem of undiscovered public knowledge is present even within very narrow and specialist fields. In response,

> we can either play the game of popularity, and read only the most cited papers, or we can process all papers using some sort of artificial intelligence. Needless to say, both choices are highly unsatisfactory (see Peters et al. 2020). How can we

know whether the most popular papers offer the best contributions to the problem? And how can we trust our artificial intelligences which have shown so many biases in the past? (Jandrić 2020b: 534)

Open access to more (or ideally all) scholarly articles would certainly benefit knowledge production. Yet, adding more knowledge to open databases only exacerbates the problem of undiscovered public knowledge caused by viral growth of the number of articles. Therefore, today's problem of knowledge 'does not only require more traditional research—more importantly, it also requires development of conceptually different research' (Jandrić 2020b: 534) and new, conceptually different publishing (knowledge) ecologies. In response to various problems of knowledge capitalism, Michael Peters offers a possible way forward in the concept of knowledge socialism.

> Whereas knowledge capitalism focuses on the economics of knowledge, emphasizing human capital development, intellectual property regimes, and efficiency and profit maximization, knowledge socialism shifts emphasis towards recognition that knowledge and its value are ultimately rooted in social relations (Peters and Besley, 2006). Knowledge socialism promotes the sociality of knowledge by providing mechanisms for a truly free exchange of ideas. (Peters et al. 2012: 88)

A group of us has already made some practical steps in that direction. In *Knowledge Socialism. The Rise of Peer Production: Collegiality, Collaboration, and Collective Intelligence* (Peters et al. 2020), we started to develop '[t]he merging idea of knowledge socialism [as] an implicit attempt at developing collective and innovative intelligence/ wisdom aimed at inspiring collective approaches to writing, producing and presenting contextually' (Gibbons et al. 2020: 315). Our latest forthcoming book, *Bioinformational Philosophy and Postdigital Knowledge Ecologies* (Peters et al. forthcoming 2022), takes the problem of the relationship between knowledge and capitalism further into theories of bioinformationalism (Peters 2012), viral modernity (Peters and Besley 2020), the postdigital condition (Jandrić et al. 2018) and others. Academic publishing is a rapidly growing field of research, and there are many other approaches developed by communities such as the Peer-to-Peer Foundation,[2] Monoskop[3] and others. Situated within knowledge capitalism, we need to actively develop new models fit for our postdigital knowledge ecologies.

How to Develop Postdigital Knowledge Ecologies?

Writing up the complete life cycle of a scholarly article was a tedious task; reading it is probably a reader's nightmare. However, it is only by laying out our current knowledge processes in their entirety, which we can identify their flaws and seek opportunities for change. These often-boring processes, and a wide array of decisions made by authors, editors, reviewers and others, can be understood only in the context of knowledge

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[2] See https://p2pfoundation.net/. Accessed 2 November 2020.
[3] See https://monoskop.org/Monoskop. Accessed 2 November 2020.

capitalism; opportunities for deeper-than-cosmetic changes lie in conceptually different frameworks such as knowledge socialism and bioinformational philosophy. So what can a mainstream academic journal such as *Postdigital Science and Education* do differently?

Once we realize that current procedures such as peer review are much more open to manipulation than usually thought, we can try and locate spaces for different approaches within them. Starting from the knowledge socialist understanding that our current processes are deeply rooted in social relations, we can begin with transforming traditional power relationships. Following these ideas, *Postdigital Science and Education* insists on postdigital dialogue (Jandrić 2019; Jandrić et al. 2019) between authors, editors, reviewers and the wider community, resulting in a more-than-average transparent, democratic and negotiable publication route. The peer review process in *Postdigital Science and Education* is very personal; authors are treated as colleagues, not numbers. Many articles are read, commented and often revised, during informal communication before the first submission to the online system. It is insisted that review reports, regardless of their decision, need to help authors improve their work. Authors of good articles that are thematically or otherwise unfit for *Postdigital Science and Education* are actively supported in finding a suitable publication venue.

In return for anonymous work on their articles, all published authors are expected to review a few submissions. Where authors and reviewers want to meet each other, the editor happily lifts the veil of anonymity—over the years, this has resulted in some valuable collaborations. Articles are actively promoted after their publication, and reviewers are publicly acknowledged for their service. Authors and reviewers are encouraged to discuss their ideas with the editor or the editorial board; they can pitch proposals for articles, issues and books; they get invited to public talks and conferences; and so on. *Postdigital Science and Education* meets all mainstream benchmarks such as criteria for inclusion into databases, so authors can rest assured that their articles will be relevant for job applications, tenure reports and so on. At the same time, the editorial board stretches the limitations of mainstream academic publishing as far as possible towards a new postdigital knowledge ecology.

Postdigital Science and Education accepts various experimental articles, often written by (sometimes very large) collectives and using novel approaches. Some of these articles are openly peer reviewed; open reviews are published together with the article, often recognizing reviewers as co-authors (see, for instance, Jandrić et al. 2019). Furthermore, *Postdigital Science and Education* supports the extensive use of graphics; a typical case in the point is the recent editorial written as a comic (Jandrić and Kuzmanić 2020). Various forms of speculative fiction, including social science fiction (see Costello et al. 2020), are also encouraged. These approaches sometimes mix and enrich each other in unusual ways. For instance, during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, *Postdigital Science and Education* published an article authored by 84 authors from 19 countries presenting their written testimonies of teaching and learning during global lockdown accompanied by their home workspace photographs (Jandrić et al. 2020).

This mix of editorials, commentary articles and testimonies opens up the question of academic genre, which is beyond the scope of this article. Whatever the genre, however, *Postdigital Science and Education* strongly encourages experimentation and places experimental articles on equal footing with articles written using more traditional approaches. The freedom to experiment is always restricted by a strong sense of

responsibility for quality of published works. Experimental articles are extensively discussed within the editorial board; good and bad outcomes are given equal attention. Research on academic publishing itself is actively encouraged and supported.

While it is impossible to counter various forms of knowledge capitalist injustice within the scope of one journal, everyone writing, editing and reviewing for *Postdigital Science and Education* becomes a part of a cutting-edge scholarly community. Maintaining the highest levels of quality and mainstream recognition, *Postdigital Science and Education* consciously dances on the very fringes of knowledge capitalist publishing and develops a new, continuously improving postdigital knowledge ecology. It takes a village to create this knowledge ecology; gathering like-minded villagers, *Postdigital Science and Education* is a watershed for those who dare to imagine radically different futures of knowledge work and experiment with those futures here and now.

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