

## **Navigating the complex space of journal editing: Exploring the tensions between the intellectual and commercial dimensions of academic publishing**

**Emma Wainwright, Brunel University London, Uxbridge, UK**

**David Aldridge, Edge Hill University, Ormskirk, UK**

**Gert Biesta, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK; Maynooth University, Maynooth, Ireland**

A call for new editors for this Journal was issued by BERA in November 2022. This comes as we enter our sixth and final year of editing BERJ. In this editorial, we reflect on the work of editors and the context within which editors are currently operating, notably that of academic publishing. This, we suggest, raises a set of questions around practices and priorities – those of editors and those of publishers – which have the potential to extend possibilities for journals but also to cause potential problems which require consideration.

Through a detailing of the role of editors, BERA's criteria are clear that "[t]he editors take ultimate responsibility for the content and editorial direction of the Journal within the aims and scope agreed by Publications Committee" (BERA, 2022: 1). Moreover, the role of editors requires "[k]eeping abreast of, and managing the journal through, developments in the academic publishing landscape" (BERA, 2022: 2). While a clear set of editorial expectations is given by BERA, this point on developments in the academic publishing landscape, and notably in relation to the transition to open access, belies some of the ambiguities that have emerged in the broader landscape of journal editing with the development of a more complex relationship between journal editors and publishers.

Journal editing is a crucial scholarly activity that shapes disciplines and maintains academic standards. There is now considerable cross-disciplinary research on the role of editors as gatekeepers or facilitators of a field of study, as well as a detailing of editors work with authors and reviewers to ensure manuscript flow and timely communications. The transparency of editors' roles, or lack of, and the challenges and complexities of this, have been much commented on (see Acker, Rekola and Wisker (2022) for a recent example within higher education). The component parts of editorship have been laid bare, and critically so given that journals are fundamental institutions of modern academic work. But what is less discussed is how editors are positioned in relation to, and work within, the wider academic publishing landscape. Moreover, what does this positioning mean for the role of editors and editorial practices, and are these compromised in the current academic publishing environment?

The publishing landscape BERA alludes to is growing in scale, range and scope. Journal editors increasingly work with large publishing houses; businesses whose practices and priorities they have little or no control over. Publishers are not neutral backdrops of journal organisation nor mechanisms solely for knowledge dissemination and reach. As publishing practices have changed considerably in recent decades and continue to change apace, they have become the focus of critique and concern, often centring on the extraction of profit from the production of academic knowledge and practice (see Biesta 2012). Mangez and Hilgers (2012) argue that in post-industrial society, intellectual work, like other forms of cultural work, is now subordinate to economic and political interests, and the value of research is dependent upon production and consumption values. These practices are all part of the wider rise of 'academic capitalism', a term that incorporates the extension of market logic into education and research through financialization and finance-dominated economic regimes (Jessop, 2018).

Journals and editors are now tied to market-related activities through their publishers' practices, bringing into sharp focus the journal-publisher relationship. One example is through the digitalisation of journals; an important means by which academic knowledge is now more widely and publicly accessible and available. At the same time, however, digitalisation means that journals are not the same bounded spaces and assemblages they once were, and arguably the role of the editors is one less of gatekeeper and curator than was previously the case. In this way, and as academic publishing searches for increased market share, there is a lessening of the academic journal community, albeit there may exist a strong journal 'home' within a learned society, as is the case with BERJ and BERA.

Digitalisation is one dimension of market-mediated competition whereby publishers seek advantage over one another as quantified by downloads, impact scores, citation indices and rankings. The increasingly advanced datafication of education (Jarke, and Breiter, 2019) extends to journals to become a means of positioning, claiming status, and adding value. This provides important transparency for authors who can make submission decisions based not only on appropriateness of journal remit, but potential 'turnaround' times. And for editors, statistics on acceptance rates and publication times, as well as the tracking of rejected articles and where they ultimately get published (with related journal ranking) are presented as a means of 'better understanding' and gaining insight into a journal, the immediate publication field, and editing practises.

However, this also raises questions about editorial scrutiny, decision making and 'curatorial' oversight; about whether and how this datafied journal knowledge potentially challenges and changes the role of a journal as itself a knowledge field. For whom does a journal exist? For what purpose does the journal exist? Though every journal is clear in its aims and scope, is this impacted by datafication and its potential uses? Do publishers and publishing practices then begin to shape the formation of knowledge and disciplinary field? Certainly, this datafication is a productive encounter for publishers, signalling the size, growth, potential and profitability of the journal publishing market. As Davies et al (2007) suggest, "[t]he emphasis on reporting quantifiable outcomes in neo-liberal forms of governance is always at risk of driving out the unquantifiable". The fast and often quantifiable indicators of 'success' perhaps overtake the slower deliberation of research ideas, and research impact metrics threaten to take on a "coercive character" as described by Arboledas-Leirida (2021).

How far then can editors set the agenda for a journal uninterrupted by publishers' interests? How far can they resist publisher-led initiatives, whether directed towards their own journal or the wider grouping of journals the publisher works with? How far can any tension between publisher remits and targets and the academic values of a journal and editorial team be resolved? For example, publisher-led cross-journal initiatives do not need to exercise the role of individual journal editors. Is the publisher just the communicator and processor of knowledge? Or, as publishing becomes marked by new modes of activity and frequency of activities, does this also become a process of agenda setting, so publishers begin to shape the knowledge field itself in ways perceived to be financially astute (see Knöchelmann, et al., 2022)? Do editors therefore become mere facilitators in enacting an agenda directed from elsewhere?

There are certainly ethical questions for editors here, some of which are prompted by Randell-Moon et al (2011) in *Ethics in Education*. As editors we need to think about who we are responsible to, and how we hold multiple and potentially conflicting responsibilities. As BERJ editors, we are responsible to BERA, the journal's authors and reviewers, and crucially to the field of educational research. But what about responsibilities to publishers? And what and whose concerns are and should be privileged in this editorial work? Indeed, how do we value research: as a consumable commodity or

for its capacity for informing change (Boyask and Vigurs, 2018)? Is there a problem if editors and publishers work with different markers of 'success'? Recognising and thinking through these questions is important for informing how this relationship is navigated.

So, this leads us to consider the future (role) of journal editors. As the academic journal and publishing landscapes change, inevitably the role of journal editors changes too. And certainly, the expansion of AI in this area cannot be ignored, which could potentially revise or undermine entirely the existing processes of peer review and editorship. Will there be a diminishment or even an eradication of the role of editors, or emerging new formations of editorship? Indeed, is there still a need for editors? Perhaps, at this point, some of these questions seem to make big leaps from where we currently are to a presumptuous bleak future for the academy, or editors at least. But yes, we would strongly argue that the role of editors remains vital because of the very fact that what drives editors is, we suggest, at odds to what drives many publishers.

We operate in not entirely different, but still sufficiently divergent, environments that shape our priorities and commitment to the production of knowledge. As editors of BERJ, we have set out in previous editorials (Aldridge et al, 2018; Biesta et al 2019 and 2022; Wainwright, et al 2020) issues we consider to be important for the discipline of education and broader fields of knowledge and practice in which they operate, and have thus endeavoured to put these into practice ourselves through our editorial decisions. Journal editorship now requires that underlying power dynamics – of contextual and competing pressures, expectations, and priorities – are acknowledged. We need to remain critical and curious about the academic publication space and the editor-publisher relationship that still has a vital place in academic publishing.

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