

COMMENTARY

Publish *and* perish: New issues in publication ethics

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Abstract

The expression "Publish or perish," first appeared in 1942. It signified the rising importance of publication as a means to obtain research funds and establish a secure academic career. The expression is still highly relevant, but increasingly problematic. Perhaps it should be revised to read "Publish and Perish." We have reached a point where researchers, especially in non-English speaking countries, are no longer able to afford to publish their research. There seems little point in undertaking research if we can no longer disseminate or, indeed, apply the wisdom gained from it.

Keywords: publication ethics, open access, article processing charges, language editing, non-English speaking countries

Publish and perish: New issues in publication ethics

The expression "Publish or Perish," first appeared in 1942 [1]. It signified the rising importance of publication as a means to obtain research funds and establish a secure academic career. The expression is still highly relevant, but increasingly problematic. Perhaps it should now be revised to read: "Publish *and* Perish." Let me explain.

In 2022, I published 35 papers in journals (See [Supplementary file](#)) boasting a wide range of impact factors. Of the 35 publications, 24 were in open access (OA) journals and 11 were in hybrid journals. In "OA journals," the article is open to all readers free of charge, and authors pay publication fees; in hybrid journals, articles are generally behind a paywall but authors can make their articles free to read by paying a publication fee.

Articles behind a paywall are less accessible to readers. When researching a particular subject, most researchers — myself included — are not willing to pay for the full text, and often make do with just the abstract. Citing on the basis of an abstract runs the risk of misquoting the article if the abstract does not adequately represent the full article. Moreover, the importance of publishing articles open access is to increase access to readers without institutional affiliation and those in countries not covered by the Health InterNetwork Access to Research Initiative (HINARI) programme [2].

Once research is completed, the main costs of publishing an article are the language editing fees, and either the Article Processing Charge (APC) or the fee to make an article open access. In this case, for two of the 35 articles, the first authors had grants, and they paid the APCs. So, no costs accrued to me. Of the remaining 33 papers, one journal did not charge APC. The full (100%) APC for one paper was covered by the university-publisher contracts, and 10% of APCs for 21 papers was also covered by such contracts. In the latter case, I had to pay 90% by myself. I did not make three papers OA because I thought many universities and institutes were subscribing to the journals in question, and APCs were as high as USD 3,500. In the end, the publication fees to make all the 28 papers open access amounted to JPY 5,107,000 (approximately USD 40,860).

The above costs are just for OA publication, and do not include the English language editing fees that non-native English speakers are required to pay to publish their work. The cost for the first stage language editing (prior to submission) of all my publications in 2022 came to a total of JPY 2,170,000 (USD 17,360). This comes to an average of JPY per 65,800 (USD 526) per article. Many papers are reviewed and returned to the authors with requests for minor or major revisions. Reviewers and editors often require further English language editing in order to be accepted.

When reviewing a paper, many publishers provide referrals to their contracted language editing companies, and authors are welcome to use their services if further language editing is required by reviewers. In my case, the total cost for second stage language editing (during the review process) was JPY 504,000 (USD 4,032). Combined with the cost of first-stage language editing, my total copy-editing charges for the year were JPY 2,674,000 (USD 21,392). In sum, the publication of 35 papers in one year cost me JPY 5,107,000 + JPY 2,674,000

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= JPY 7,781,000 (USD 62,248) just for publication fees and English language editing.

Two experiences stand out to illustrate my point about increasing costs. This past year began with the publication of a 400-word letter responding to an article published in a well-known journal. I simply wanted to point out that the article's author had misunderstood some points regarding Japan. The Editor agreed with the importance of my insights and asked me to write a review article on this topic. I accepted the request and wrote a fairly lengthy article (8,000 words). However, the APC for this journal is very high. Combined with the language editing fees of JPY 26,322 (USD 211), I spent a total of JPY 477,975 (USD 3,824) on just this one paper.

On another occasion, I wrote a 500-word letter about a very important case, but the manuscript editor asked me to provide more information and add more discussion, which increased the word length to more than 1,000 words. I felt that the content was such that it should be widely read, so I paid for it to be made OA, for EUR 700 (JPY 100,286 or USD 802), and had it edited for language for JPY 13,332 (USD 107), amounting to a total of JPY 113,618 (USD 909).

Situations like these are extremely disadvantageous for non-native English-speaking researchers. Some might think that a researcher publishing so many papers each year would have no problem obtaining grant funding to cover such costs. However, this is not necessarily the case. In Japan, public competitive grants cover the costs for OA and language editing only when papers are directly related to the grant purposes. Private grants in Japan prohibit outright use of any grant money to cover the cost of English language editing and OA fees for publication.

In sum, language editing charges are disadvantageous to non-native English language researchers. Journals requiring article processing charges are disadvantageous to all authors with limited resources, or without funding designated for APC, especially those in lower- and middle-income countries.

I hope this clarifies my call to utilise the phrase "Publish and Perish." If current circumstances persist, scientific research will face considerable challenges. Young researchers will be unable to become established. My intent here is not to downplay the interests of publishers, language editing service companies, universities, governments and private funders, but rather to point out that the perspectives and interests of researchers who actually conduct the research are being undermined.

What is the way forward?

There are three important factors that may assist in this debate.

The university-publisher relationship

The University of Tokyo has contracts with some journals wherein, in exchange for a subscription, the university has signed an agreement to waive publication fees for its

researchers, as long as they are the first or corresponding authors. This is beneficial for both the university and the publisher.

Journal policy

If journals require English editing for non-English speaking researchers after the review processes are completed, the journal should recommend editing companies which provide a reliable and cost-effective service before resubmission.

The purpose of research

Finally, and most significantly, we must consider the purpose and significance of research for society. I believe the problems of charges for article processing and language editing are just examples of what is undermining scientific research and publication.

The subject of this paper is the cost of open access publishing. Is the current system of APC and editing costs benefiting humankind? What happens if the costs, and the obstacles they present, preclude a scientific breakthrough, thus undermining scientific progress?

I will end this essay with examples from journal policies that indicate a better way forward.

For instance, the open access journal of which I am the founding editor, which offers space for publishing new research and exchanges within the bioethics field, does not charge fees [3].

Another academic journal states in the submission guidelines that the journal is OA, and the payment of APC or publication fee by authors is voluntary, on a PWYW - Pay What You Want basis, including no payment [4].

Such policies encourage scientific discovery and dissemination of important information. If this is not viable for all journals, could publishers at least reduce their fees in line with the costs incurred by them? We have reached a point where researchers are no longer able to afford to continue publishing their research. If we acknowledge the importance of research for the future survival of humankind, is such a change so unreasonable? I am not saying that all publishers should be required to make such a change. However, there seems little point in undertaking research if we can no longer disseminate results or indeed apply the wisdom gained from it.

Supplementary file: [List of papers published by the author.](#)

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