

Thoughts on how scholar-led publishing can overcome the effect of the prestige economy

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Thoughts on how scholar-led publishing can overcome the effect of the prestige economy

An increase in the development of scholar-led diamond open access (DOA) journals might be part of the future of academic publishing. However, a successful outcome to such an endeavour would require a broad range of well-published and early career academics to publish in them. Higher education institutions and their academics compete in a global prestige market. Therefore, the problem of the prestige economy may need to be overcome in order to encourage academics to publish in newly created scholar-led DOA journals. Contributions to publishing in and editing scholar-led DOA journals need to be recognized, and endorsed, by managerial staff and/or higher education institutions. Moreover, people can be affected by a status quo bias, are loss averse, often prefer to remain consistent with previous decisions and are motivated to avoid the potential for regret. The prestige economy may be reinforced by these effects when authors select a journal as an outlet for their work. Moreover, existing attitudes, habits and an author's self-concept can affect how they select a journal. These cognitive effects could be targeted by a professional development intervention aimed at increasing the likelihood of authors selecting a scholar-led DOA journal as an outlet for their work.

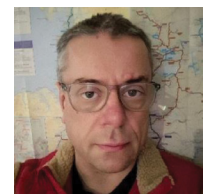
Keywords

scholar-led publishing, prestige economy, status quo bias, decision-making, attitudes and habits, intervention

Introduction

Current ideas on the future of academic publishing include the involvement of academics in collective and collaborative not-for-profit open access publishing ([Adema & Moore, 2018](#); [Loacker, 2021](#)). The creation of independent scholar-led online open access journals can include editorial and formatting practices that involve more creativity than the industrialized style of production used by traditional journals ([Loacker, 2021](#)). A publishing model that can be adopted by scholar-led journals is the diamond open access (DOA) model. The DOA model involves the not-for-profit online publishing of academic work. In this model there are no financial costs to readers, authors or libraries ([Fuchs & Sandoval, 2013](#)). The move towards scholar-led DOA publishing is clearly a positive one, but it has yet to become the dominant form of publishing. Moreover, the number of authors publishing in predatory journals might be reduced if more opportunities exist for authors to publish in scholar-led DOA journals ([du Rocher, 2025](#); [Teixeira da Silva et al., 2022](#)). The present discussion focuses on some predictable barriers to the success of newly developed scholar-led DOA journals and a possible professional development intervention to the predicted barriers.

A successful outcome to the development of new scholar-led DOA journals would require a broad range of academics to publish in them. Contributing authors would need to be a mixture of well-published academics as well as early career academics, and not just academics who might feel the need to publish in less well-known journals. Contributing authors would also need to be from higher education institutions in non-western, global south, and/or developing countries as well as higher education institutions in western, global north, and/or developed countries. The success of these new journals would also require well-published academics to be involved in the creation and management of the



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2 journals, as well as the publication of research in the journals. Otherwise, such journals may be perceived as existing solely for authors who might feel the need to publish in less well-known journals. To achieve this goal, there are several barriers that need to be considered. Thus, the following discussion focuses on the problem of the prestige economy in higher education, some well-known effects in the judgement and decision-making literature, and how attitudes and habits might affect an author's choice of journal when publishing their work.

The prestige problem

Databases order journals into a prestige hierarchy and compare academics' citation scores against other academics (Hyland, 2023). Higher education institutions and their academics compete in a global prestige market, where the traded commodities may not have a direct monetary value (Blackmore, 2016). Career development is often a reward for publication in prestigious journals (Hyland, 2023). The desire to obtain prestige by publishing in well-known research journals is fundamental to the prestige economy in academia (Blackmore & Kandiko, 2011). The academic publishing process includes an interaction between a monetary economy and a prestige economy which fuels a system of academic capitalism (Blackmore & Kandiko, 2011). For example, well known journal publishers who charge monetary fees for their services can offer prestige to authors which in turn aids their academic career progression. As academics are not financially rewarded for their articles this prestige serves as the only payment. Although this prestige is reliant upon perception, it may manifest a cyclical effect. For example, the prestige received as payment from the publisher to the author aids their host higher education institution to increase their own prestige by recruiting more well-published academics (in addition to fee-paying students). Moreover, a well-cited article (by an academic at a prestigious higher education institution) increases the prestige of the journal in which it is published. Journals that are published and distributed with printed paper copies can be seen as more prestigious than electronic online only journals and can charge higher subscription fees. Prestige can therefore have a theoretical financial value (Tötösy de Zepetnek & Jia, 2014). However, although so-called prestigious journals do publish high-value research articles, they also publish low-value articles. By contrast, so-called low prestige journals also publish high-value research articles (Starbuck, 2005).

'The desire to obtain prestige by publishing in well-known research journals is fundamental to the prestige economy in academia'

The need for academics to gain attention from readers, funding organizations and institutional promotion boards can mean that attention also serves as a form of capital and currency (Franck, 2016). Thus, academic publishing has also become entwined with a form of attention economy (Hyland, 2023), as well as the prestige economy (Blackmore & Kandiko, 2011). Survey based research (Niles et al., 2020) shows that the three most important factors affecting the choice of journal when deciding where to publish academic papers were the desirability of the readership, journal and/or publisher prestige and whether the authors' peers read content from the journal or publisher on a regular basis. The perceived value of journal prestige, impact factors and citation scores were weakly negatively correlated with age. Thus, there may be a tendency for (at least some) older authors to be less affected by these factors than younger authors. In addition, this study showed that authors were likely to think their peers valued journal or publisher prestige, journal citation scores and impact factors more than they did. By contrast, authors appeared to think that they valued whether the journal was open access, and valued the desirability of the journal's readership, more than their peers did. Furthermore, over half of early career faculty admitted that they make publishing decisions based on what they perceive as being important for their career progression and promotion. This included choosing publication outlets for their work based on perceived journal prestige (Niles et al., 2020).

The perception of prestige may bias social learning processes. For example, people who are perceived as being prestigious can be preferentially copied in some situations (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001; Jiménez & Mesoudi, 2019). The brain's basal ganglia complex (which

3 includes the striatum) is part of a reward-related, brain-behavioural system that is modulated by the neurochemical dopamine. This system is activated during interactions that result in cooperation, trust formation, and thus, social learning (Delgado, 2007). Therefore, the striatum might well be sensitive to the perceived social status of others (Koski et al., 2015). Thus, early career academics may preferentially try to publish in well-known journals, as they are simply emulating other academics in their institution who are much further along in their career.

There has also been extensive discussion about how national research evaluation exercises and hierarchical career environments contribute to the prestige economy. In short, publishing in prestigious academic journals is perceived as important in countries that have adopted strict research evaluation frameworks, which are combined with competitive career environments. Moreover, research evaluation is often based on journal metrics which are seen as proxies for measures of research quality. In research intensive universities, this evaluation affects the likelihood of promotion and can also affect who has access to resources (Kwiek, 2021). However, in several countries there has been a move towards responsible assessment when conducting research evaluation exercises (for discussion see Morgan-Thomas et al., 2024). This responsible assessment is conducted by panels of experts whose judgment and decision-making are not supposed to be based upon journal metrics. The UK Research Excellence Framework (REF) is an example of a move towards responsible assessment. There is, however, still some concern that journal metrics and perceived journal prestige could influence decisions made by panels of experts conducting the next REF (Morgan-Thomas et al., 2024).

'research evaluation is often based on journal metrics which are seen as proxies for measures of research quality'

There are also likely to be some other factors that reinforce the prestige economy and any bias towards the desire to publish in well-known and/or prestigious journals. Hence the factors that need consideration here include the bias towards maintaining the status quo, effects of judgment and decision-making, and the effects of authors' attitudes, habits and their self-concept.

The status quo bias

The human predisposition for the selection and maintenance of one's current and/or previous choices has been termed 'the status quo bias' (Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988). People can assume that the existence of a situation is evidence that it is good (Eidelman et al., 2009). They can also be motivated to favour social systems that already exist and can therefore be motivated to maintain the status quo (Jost et al., 2004). In addition, they can be inclined to rate an existing business administration requirement as being higher in goodness, rightness and closer to the way things should be in comparison to an alternative business administration requirement (Eidelman et al., 2009). It is easy to see how the assumption that an existing situation or system of administration must be good can contribute to the maintenance of the prestige economy. If authors assume that the current prestige-based hierarchy in research journals is right and good, then this will obviously affect their choice of where to publish. During decision-making the salience of any status quo maintaining option may be greater than the salience of the options that represent a change. This salience may increase selection of the status quo maintaining option (Miceli & Suri, 2023). In the context of the current debate, well-known and/or prestigious journals would be more salient than new scholar-led DOA journals.

Biases in judgement and decision-making

Journal reputation, international specialist audience and open access status have all been categorized as a set of general criteria that facilitate a general trend that occurs when researchers choose where to publish their work. This seems to result in a bandwagon effect where researchers base their publishing decisions on the perceived publishing choices of other researchers (Johann et al., 2024). There is not much research available that specifically explores judgment and decision-making when authors make their choice of journal as an outlet for their

work. The existing literature on judgment and decision-making is, however, likely to be quite informative when considering how academics might choose where to publish. For example, prospective gains and prospective losses are considered in comparison to any current state, and people tend to be loss averse ([Tversky & Kahneman, 1991](#)). Thus, authors may be concerned that if they publish in a new scholar-led DOA journal they will lose either status, citation counts and/or the chance of promotion relative to if they publish in an established journal or prestigious journal. Moreover, they can prefer to make decisions that remain consistent with previous decision-making ([Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988](#)) and are motivated to avoid the potential for regret, which is more likely to result from action as opposed to inaction ([Ritov & Baron, 1992](#)). All these biases in judgment and decision-making may be a barrier to authors choosing to publish in a different type of journal than they chose on previous occasions.

Attitudes and habits

A person's attitudes can be considered as their tendencies to appraise objects or entities with a degree of disfavour or favour ([Eagly & Chaiken, 1993](#)). Attitudes that are strong can be stable over prolonged periods of time and have an impact upon a person's behaviour ([Howe & Krosnick, 2017](#)). Thus, it is easy to see how attitudes that are based upon an acceptance of the current prestige-based hierarchy in research journals and an acceptance of the prestige economy in academia would affect an author's choice of where to publish. It has been argued that strong attitudes often facilitate the formation of habits. A person's habits can be described as their propensities towards producing automatic behavioural responses to environmental cues that have already activated behaviour in previous situations ([Verplanken & Orbell, 2022](#)). The level of journal prestige might be such an environmental cue that leads to a habitual behavioural response when authors are making choices of journals as an outlet for their work. A person's own behaviour can be rewarding if it shares a high level of consistency with their own self-concept. This might promote behaviour repetition and thus habit formation ([Verplanken & Orbell, 2022](#)). A person's self-concept is their sense of themselves. This would include all the person's feelings and thoughts referring to the self as an object ([Rosenberg, 1989](#)). It is possible that the self-concept of some authors is congruent with the desire to publish in traditional high prestige high impact journals. By contrast, the self-concept of other authors might be more congruent with the desire to publish in scholar-led DOA journals.

Towards an intervention

A widespread policy needs to be adopted to ensure that members of research evaluation panels, and institutional promotion panels, are not influenced by journal metrics and perceived journal prestige. This policy then needs to be made salient to university faculty. This opinion piece has considered how the prestige economy might be reinforced by the status quo bias and the effects of authors judgment and decision-making (and their interrelated attitudes and habits) when they make decisions of where to publish their work. This may impair the success of newly created scholar-led DOA journals. Editors of such journals will not have direct access to these potential contributing authors, so will not easily be able to address this issue. By contrast, senior academics, managerial staff and higher education institutions themselves do have direct access to faculty who are the potential contributing authors who might publish in new scholar-led DOA journals. An intervention could be developed and used in professional development sessions that is based on targeting some of the biases in cognitive processing that are described above. Behaviour changes and professional development in university faculty can be facilitated by social learning processes, and exposure to behaviour in social groups can change the cognitive-behavioural activity of university faculty ([Bond & Blevins, 2020](#)). Moreover, the science of judgment and decision-making focuses on the links between cognitive processes and specific outcomes, and can therefore inform the design of cognitive behavioural interventions ([Leddy et al., 2013](#)). Such an intervention could be used in professional development sessions aimed at targeting how authors make decisions of where to publish their work.

'Behaviour changes and professional development in university faculty can be facilitated by social learning processes'

To reduce the status quo bias (described above) professional development sessions need to increase the salience of scholar-led DOA journals relative to the salience of prestigious journals. This could be achieved via professional development sessions where faculty are introduced to the concept of scholar-led DOA publishing. The bias towards loss aversion (Tversky & Kahneman, 1991) and motivation to avoid regret (Ritov & Baron, 1992) could also be addressed. For example, these training sessions can reinforce the notion that academic status will not be lost when publishing in scholar-led DOA journals as opposed to high prestige journals and reinforce the notion that faculty will not be assessed on personal citation counts.

Professional development sessions could also focus on attitudes that affect publishing choice. A holistic understanding of attitudes incorporates three contexts: 1) the person as a whole, which includes values, goals and emotional and developmental influences; 2) the social context, which includes interactions with social communication including digital media; and 3) the broad socio-historical context, which includes political, climatic, economic and cultural events (Albarracín & Shavitt, 2018). All three contexts can be targeted in an attitude change intervention where faculty are introduced to the concept of the prestige economy and the opposing concept of scholar-led DOA publishing. Faculty can be encouraged to consider how the values and goals of scholar-led DOA journals (as opposed to traditional or prestigious journals) can fit with their own values, goals and the social context of their own interaction with research journals. Moreover, the broader socio-historical context of the move towards scholar-led DOA publishing can be taught. This component of the attitude change intervention could reinforce an understanding of the need for, and benefits of, global public access to research and creative works, and the gradual shift towards conceptualizing DOA as a public service (e.g. Fuchs & Sandoval, 2013). If this results in the formation of strong and stable attitudes, then this could aid the formation of new habitual behaviour (Verplanken & Orbell, 2022).

Interventions aimed at changing habitual responding can be based upon targeting the links between environmental cues and habitual behavioural responses (Verplanken & Orbell, 2022). Accordingly, the above intervention based on attitude change may subsequently change habitual responses by targeting the link between the environmental cue (perceived level of journal prestige) and the behavioural response (author's choice of journal as an outlet for their work). However, the frequency and consistency of a new behaviour, as well as the degree of positive affect that is related to a new behaviour, can affect whether a new behaviour eventually results in the formation of a new habitual response (Lally & Gardner, 2013). The experience of reward can encourage new habitual behaviour (Verplanken & Orbell, 2022). For example, behaviour that results in approval from other people may become habitual if it is reinforced by a reward-related brain-behavioural system in the basal ganglia complex (which includes the striatum) that is modulated by the neurochemical dopamine (Amaya & Smith, 2018). Therefore, as discussed by Fuchs and Sandoval (2013), the publication of research papers in new scholar-led DOA journals needs to be approved of, and rewarded by, senior academics, managerial staff and the higher education institutions themselves. Moreover, universities should adopt institutional policies that recognize the work of their staff if they have contributed to running a DOA journal. Universities could also prioritize taking publications in scholar-led DOA journals into account when considering promotions and conducting research publication evaluation (Fuchs & Sandoval, 2013).

Exposing faculty to the values and goals of DOA publishing (Fuchs & Sandoval, 2013) might encourage the modification of the part of their self-concept that relates to their attitudes and habits concerning where they publish their work. Moreover, a perspective on information communication referred to as 'digital socialism' asks that the internet is used for collective not-for-profit public digital communication (Fuchs, 2020). Professional development sessions can be used to encourage faculty to find a link between parts of their self-concept that relate to publishing decisions and political perspectives on internet publishing. After all, a person's self-concept is likely to be malleable (DeSteno & Salovey, 1997; Richman et al., 2015) and can therefore potentially be changed via an intervention.

'Universities could also prioritize taking publications in scholar-led DOA journals into account'

The professional development intervention described here would target how authors make decisions of where to publish their work. Outcome measures would be needed for such an intervention. These should include an attitude-change assessment where the strengths of positive attitudes towards publishing in scholar-led DOA journals relative to publishing in high prestige journals are measured pre- and post-educational instruction. In the longer-term, institutions need to monitor whether faculty have increased the number of articles submitted to scholar-led DOA journals relative to traditional high prestige journals. Moreover, institutions need to monitor if there is an increase in the number of articles in scholar-led DOA journals relative to traditional high prestige journals that are submitted as part of future national research assessment exercises. In short, the prestige component of the prestige economy needs to be replaced with a DOA component, so that publishing in DOA journals is desired, approved of and rewarded more than publishing in prestigious journals.

'the prestige component of the prestige economy needs to be replaced with a DOA component, so that publishing in DOA journals is desired'

Conclusion

An increase in the development of scholar-led DOA journals might be part of the future of academic publishing. However, a successful outcome to such an endeavour would require a broad range of well-published and early career academics to publish in the journals. In order to encourage academics to publish in newly created DOA journals (or contribute to creating or editing the journals) the problem of the prestige economy may need to be overcome. Thus, publishing in, and involvement with, scholar-led DOA journals need to be recognized and endorsed by managerial staff and/or higher education institutions themselves. People can be affected by a status quo bias (Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988), are generally loss averse (Tversky & Kahneman, 1991), often prefer to remain consistent with previous decisions (Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988) and are generally motivated to avoid the potential for regret (Ritov & Baron, 1992). The prestige economy may be reinforced by these effects which may occur when authors select a journal as an outlet for their work. Moreover, existing attitudes, habits and an author's self-concept could also affect how they select a journal as an outlet for their work. However, these cognitive effects could be changed via a professional development intervention aimed at increasing the likelihood of authors selecting a scholar-led DOA journal as an outlet for their work.

Abbreviations and Acronyms

A list of the abbreviations and acronyms used in this and other *Insights* articles can be accessed here – click on the following URL and then select the 'full list of industry A&As' link: <http://www.uksg.org/publications#aa>.

Competing interests

The author has declared no competing interests.

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