

Editorial: Scholarship – pay to publish?

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The “vanity press” has been around decades. These are publishers who charge authors to publish their work (usually dissertations) thus enabling authors to include a book on their vitae. Rank and tenure committees assess such monographs with suspicion, and many academicians view them with scorn. How concerned should we be that the “pay-to-publish” model has now infiltrated the scholarly journal environment? Should we be skeptical of articles published in all pay-to-publish journals? Is there a way to determine if some of these journals adhere to the same standards of scholarship as traditional scholarly journals? What potential ethical issues do such publications raise for us as social workers if we are writing or reviewing for these journals?

I am a sample of one, but here are my experiences. Years ago, I was the book review editor for *The Journal of Law and Social Work*, a journal subsidized by a number of universities with which it was associated. Highly specialized journals, such as *JLSW*, typically have between 300 and 600 subscribers. Subscription rates cannot cover the cost of publication and distribution. Without universities to underwrite them, these journals cannot survive. *JLSW*, like other scholarly journals of that time, died as a result of university budget cuts. At first glance, it might appear that requiring authors to pay to publish is a reasonable alternative to ensure the survival journals. Do such journals deserve praise for using an entrepreneurial model to survive or should we view them with the same suspicion and scorn as vanity book publishers?

I submitted a manuscript to a medical-geriatric journal where it was accepted after some

minor modifications. I realized that practitioners and scholars actually read this online medical journal when I began to receive requests to speak on the topic of my article. Ten years later, when I submitted another manuscript to the *same journal* the editor emailed to inform me that they had instituted the fee-for-page requirement to ensure the journal’s survival. Evidently, unlike social work journals, this medical journal paid its copy editors, thus the need to charge authors a fee. Despite this explanation, and the journal’s good reputation, my co-author took an uncompromising position. She did not trust fee-for-page journals, and we found another journal to publish our manuscript. In the end, I believe this journal is a reputable one – despite the fact that they charge authors a fee to publish their work.

As the editor of *The Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics*, I keep my eye on conference presentations. When I see a quality presentation, consistent with the JSWVE mission statement, I email the author and suggest submitting to our journal. Recently I received an invitation to submit a manuscript for publication. I was quite flattered until I learned there was a \$60 fee-for-page charge. WOW! In my mind’s eye, the price was extreme. The “feel” of the web page and the email from the journal editor made me distinctly uncomfortable. Although I have no empirical verification, my impression was that this journal was potentially exploiting junior faculty who might see paying \$60 a page as a worthwhile investment to meet the demands of tenure and promotion.

I cannot say that fee-for-page journals have lower standards than traditional scholarly journals.

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Some require blind referees (as does the medical-geriatric journal noted above) while others exist only to make a buck. It does appear these journals are here to stay. The problem is, we have no reliable mechanisms for distinguishing the scammers from the scholars. Articles from NPR, *Mother Jones* and *Slate* paint an unflattering picture of fee-for-page journals. The *NASW Code of Ethics* advises social workers to “seek to contribute to the profession’s literature...” (5.01d, p. 24). The *Code* also enjoins us to “work toward the maintenance and promotion of high standards of practice” (5.01a, p. 24).

If social workers pay to publish, are we maintaining and promoting high standards of practice? Have you had experience with pay-to-publish journals? If so, please share your experiences. Send your comments to smarson@nc.rr.com .