Editorial

The death and resurrection of manuscript submission systems

The first paper in this issue of *Prometheus* is about academic publishing, an activity so very profitable for the large publishers who dominate the industry, and so very costly for the academics who provide these publishers with papers free of charge, and editorial and refereeing services equally *gratis*. What comes free is not always appreciated and is readily squandered, which perhaps says something about the logic of manuscript submission systems. For years, journals have insisted that manuscripts be submitted on automated systems supplied by the publisher and tailored, at least nominally, to each journal's requirements. These systems are supposed to help journal editors keep track of papers going through the submission and assessment process. Not all editors like these systems, though a few were able to find a use in their own research for 'the submission data authors needlessly have to upload to our data system' (Schroter *et al*., 2022, p.4).

Authors loathe manuscript submission systems. They find them time-consuming, hostile and, most offensive of all, pointless. One estimate is that each submission via a manuscript submission system takes the author about 14 hours (Khan *et al*., 2018; LeBlanc *et al*., 2019). Mistakes are easily made and summarily punished; a submission may be 'unsubmitted' and resubmission required on grounds as trivial as 'references should use "&" not "and"'. With each rejection – and many top journals value a high rejection rate as a sign of quality – the author has been expected to find another 14 hours for resubmission. It would seem that authors have been spending longer reformatting their submissions than refereeing papers, a valid comparison in that publishers (and their editors) bewail the reluctance of academics to volunteer their services as referees, usually on the grounds that they cannot spare the time, and have no wish to serve the interests of academic publishers anyway. Nothing daunted, publishers have resorted to their manuscript submission systems to overcome the shortage, inviting authors to serve as referees as part of the submission process, an invitation generally considered unwise to refuse.

So, what is the point of manuscript submission systems? Keeping authors in their place may be one motivation. The Springer manuscript submission system allows authors of accepted papers just 48 hours to check proofs, obviously assuming that authors can drop everything to oblige. But beyond the gratuitous offence they cause, manuscript submission systems gather data about the submission and its author. It is some time since the value of the publisher's product has had much to do with the information papers contain: data have become much more valuable than academic content. The largest academic publishers are owned by even larger information companies. Elsevier, by far the biggest of the publishing behemoths, now calls itself an 'information analytics' company rather than a publisher (Fillon *et al.*, 2024). Data from manuscript submission systems may be more reliable than data from academic publishing's two major databases. Clarivate's Web of Science (WoS), and Elsevier's Scopus are said to be riddled with errors (Stević, 2024; van Eck and Waltman, 2019) and stand accused of being more concerned with marketing than data accuracy (Franceschini *et al.*, 2016).

About ten years ago, with great fanfare, the large academic publishers announced major modifications to their manuscript submission systems. Elsevier, for instance, launched its 'Your Paper, Your Way' programme, simplifying submission for authors. A more radical improvement was the automatic resubmission of rejected manuscripts, without reformatting and often without more peer review. Papers could cascade from one to another of the publisher's own journals, through ever-descending journal impact factors (JIF) and article processing charges (APC). Springer favoured a tributary system: it publishes *Nature*, but also some 40 other *Nature* titles feeding off *Nature's* scraps (Khelfaoui and Gingras, 2020).

One assumes that new style management submission systems were introduced less to help authors than to encourage the retention of paying customers, which is what open access has made authors. The more papers they publish, the more they earn, a business model that has served predatory publishers well and is now being emulated by their more established competitors, currently offering authors quick turnaround, scant peer review and little editorial control. There is logic here. Publishers' returns had become less dependent on quality and JIF than on APC and the response was to publish any papers whose authors would pay. The publisher suddenly became best buddy of any author who could bring an APC their way. Publishers profess a new interest in what the author is reading and how they might assist. This unaccustomed concern extends to how quickly the author's submission can be published – 33 days in one instance (Björk, 2021). This new-found efficiency affords little time for editors and referees to improve a paper (Amaral, 2018), which is no longer a priority. Peer review lite involves nothing more than checking papers for factual accuracy, referees being instructed not to consider whether a paper is of any importance or even interest (Spezi *et al.*, 2017). The business model is both simple and seductive: the more the publisher publishes – and some journals now publish hundreds of papers in each issue (Ioannidis *et al.*, 2023) – the more money the publisher makes.

At the same time, some publishers have turned to further automation in their submission systems, making them so gruesome that the author is reluctant to take so much sunk capital elsewhere. For instance, submission to Emerald journals now includes a structured introduction arranged in five categories, each response to be completed in no more than 100 words, the section total amounting to no more than 250 words. In God's name, why? Rejection is equally formulaic, the explanation being that it is unreasonable to expect the editorial staff of a journal serving a global scholarly community to speak English. Invitation to resubmit without reformatting is automated and immediate: 'Emerald's Manuscript Transfer Service uses machine learning to analyse your manuscript to identify suitable alternative Emerald journals that are a good match for your research'. And to think that *Prometheus* expects no more from submitting authors than an email attachment.

Adrian Barnett, Natalia Gonzalez Bohorquez and colleagues from Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane and Duke-NUS Medical School in Singapore write on a related matter in academic publishing. They focus on how much authors in Health and Medicine are swayed by journal status in deciding where to submit their papers. By status, the authors mean the journal's impact factor. There are few in academic publishing who would defend the notorious impact factor; it is a nonsense and yet it has ruled supreme in academic publishing for decades. Barnett, Bohorquez and colleagues find it to be more significant in an author's choice of journal than anything else. Authors would even fiddle their results if this would make their paper more attractive to the journal with the highest impact factor. Thus it is that authors are willing to lower the quality of their paper in order to increase its chances of publication in the highest quality journal (as measured by the journal impact factor).

Adrian Barnett's submission offered *Prometheus* its first excursion into open peer review, an experiment organized by MetaROR in the hope of breathing new life into the moribund peer review system. Pre-prints of papers attract peer reviews and their reports are made publicly available on the internet to be used by any journal to which the authors submit their work. The weak point in the system would seem to be the self-selection of reviewers and *Prometheus* appointed its own referee whose report complemented the existing reviews. Decrepit the peer review system may be, but giving it up altogether comes hard.

Luke Fernandez from Weber State University in Utah is worried about artificial intelligence (AI). More precisely, he is worried about the hype surrounding AI, and particularly about whether focus on the wonders of AI distracts from what AI might be designed to do. Fernandez speaks from a computing background and argues that how AI is designed can shape how power is distributed in society. The works of Langdon Winner help exploration of this concern from a new perspective, from what AI can do to what AI is being made to do.

Innovation has been at the heart of government industrial policy for years and is the primary interest of *Prometheus*. Focus is traditionally on manufacturing innovation. No one would deny that innovation occurs in the much larger service sector, but this is much harder to study and its lessons are more difficult to apply in firm strategy and government policy. Lindie Schuld, Alex Antonites, Dawie Bornman and Muriel Serfontein-Jordaan from the University of Pretoria address this neglect, confirming that, as with other innovation, customers and employees in the service sector are likely to be fundamental sources of the information required for innovation as well as major beneficiaries of innovation in the sector.

Steven Umbrello, our book review editor since 2018, has decided to give someone else the opportunity to take on the hardest job of all in journal publishing. Being book review editor requires ensuring book publishers appreciate that reviewers deserve a hard copy rather than an electronic version of the book they are to review, and that an academic review is quite different from promotional blurb. It requires finding reviewers willing to work without pay or recognition in official performance measures, reviewers with opinions to express, and being understanding but firm when reminding reviewers that the reviews should be submitted before the book is out of print. Steven achieved all this, and much more. From all at *Prometheus*, thanks. He promises to betray the secrets of his success to his successor, but volunteers have been scarce. Anyone who would like to discuss becoming the new *Prometheus* book review editor, please contact me.

Stuart Macdonald
General editor

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