ON HOW TO DEVALUE JOURNALS

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Abstract: In this follow-up of my previous article, I continue to analyze and describe the current situation of academic publishing in Romania, but this time I plan to take a closer look at the status of academic journals. While one could be impressed by the current proliferation of this type of publications, we must be aware that this also unavoidably brings inflation in this field and, as a predictable consequence, a lack of genuine interest for the matters published in these journals. Also, we cannot help addressing the subject of profit-seeking publishers.

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My previous editorial (“On how to devalue books”, Annales Philosophici 6/2013, pp. 7-10) described the situation of book publishing – and, most of all, academic book publishing – in post-revolutionary Romania, but without the epilogue. I mentioned there the situation of a newly founded publishing house (it is the time now the reveal its name: Ratio et Revelatio) and the struggle its owner and manager faced while trying to establish a reputation in an economy driven by the quest for quick profit at any cost. The uncomfortable situation I promised to explain in this editorial is as it follows: more than 13.000 copies of the books published so far are waiting for their buyers (literally, a full garage; the amount of books is due to the fact the printer house in neighboring Hungary is offering extremely low prices and very good quality, but only if you print over 1000 copies/book). In money, we are talking of something close to 20.000 Euros (the average monthly wage in Romania is around 350 Euros or 520 USD), obviously paid out of his own pocket (economies and bank credits). I did not feel the need to mention this before, but maybe it is necessary to state that my friend is not looking for a big profit and he is not doing this as a hobby or a side-job: his main goal (as utopic as this sounds) is to contribute in his way to the development of Romanian culture while also making a normal living for him and his family. Briefly, financially speaking he is quite stranded at the moment. And since he cannot hope to sell enough books only through the website of the publishing house, he took the following steps: first, since we are talking about good books, it was quite easy to get their names mentioned in some of the most important cultural journals in Romania, along with positive reviews (this was free of any kind of charge since there still are some nice people in the cultural media who only seek to promote good books for the reading public). Secondly, he rented a stand in the biggest book fair in Romania held in Bucharest. As presumed, this is not for free; au contraire, the organizers charge you massively for a couple of square meters in the four days of fair, while the facilities they provide are – to put it rather nicely – Spartan. Thirdly, he contacted the major book
distributers in the country (the major players in the book-selling industry, be they book store chains – those who reach the “mall audience”, or online distributers) only to find out that they charge around 50% from the shelf price of a book. Even more, while trying to launch some of the books, he found out that locally renowned book stores charge up to 60% of the shelf-price for the books you sell within the event, if you organize it in the store. We should also add that all of my friend’s business is done in absolutely legal ways and, while this seems to be an futile remark for more law abiding countries, in Romania there are a lot of book industry competitor which try to elude their obligations to the state budget (there are several ways in which one can deceit regulations concerning work contracts or fiscal duties).

To sum up, as experience teaches me, there is no apparent way to start such a business from the scratch and be successful at it; the fact that the above mentioned printing house managed to win an award from the National Printers Guild for the best entry in the business remains a pale and meaningless consolation. Meanwhile, their efforts – both financial and spiritual – are rather useless.

But if this is the case of somewhat commercial enterprises (it doesn’t matter that we are talking of cheap literature or translations from Greek or Latin), and the case of the so-called academic literature (as I have showed in the previous editorial), maybe it is up to the academic journals to perform the task of delivering solid and quality work to those interested in documenting themselves. Unfortunately, as you can already guess given the title of this piece, this is not the case either. I must start by apologizing in advance to those of my peers which try to raise and maintain the standards of their journals, but I am sure that they already know by themselves that most of Romanian academic journals are – to put it mildly – with shortages in several important aspects such as quality control, proper editorial policies, accurate peer review system, distribution a.s.o. In all fairness, we must discern though between two types of poor quality journals and, subsequently, we should try to understand the motivations for each case in order to better draw the portrait of academic journal publishing (please note, as said above, we exclude those legitimate, well established and recognized journals, which are – in fact – a small minority).

Why would someone bother to publish and maintain a poor journal? Well, obviously, like in the case of any other human action, there is something to be gained from this activity, be that something material or immaterial. The last case is also the most simple: when ego drives you to do found a journal just for the sake of bearing the title of chief editor (and when you don’t have the same egotistic drive to be the “chief-editor of the best journal in the field”) that means you will resort to all kind of compromise in order to get the thing published each year. Without any empirical proof, but with intuition and from my own experience, such journals show their real profile and goals rather soon and, obviously, their typical readers (if any) and contributors are strongly related to the person/persons which founded them.

When it comes to material gains, the situation is again pretty clear and we can see two types of behaviors: publishing a journal in order to meet specific criteria for preferment (advancement in the academic environment) or specifically publishing a journal for the money it could bring. Let’s dwell a bit on the mechanisms which allow the existence of these situations; in Romania, like in many other emerging academic environments, we tend to import and mimic some of the habits of the more advanced countries (the desire to be “Western” is an extremely old obsession for Romanian culture, but this is a topic for another time). Therefore, when things started getting global (let’s say, for the sake of the argument, that this happened somewhere around the year 2000) we started to massively import academic techniques and academic terms which were not really interiorized by
many of those involved in academic life, especially by those working in less important universities. Along with changes in financing for higher education and changes in the political view over academic life, more and more “objective” criteria started appearing for promotion. If before these changes many people got to be made professors (the highest rank in the Romanian academic system) even for little as writing one or two books (see my previous editorial for details on how this affected the value of printed books in Romania), now anybody wanting to reach better positions had to win research financing competitions, had to be members of professional associations, had to be invited to teach abroad and – most important for the subject of this editorial – had to publish articles in specific journals. From time to time, especially after ministerial changes brought by political elections, the agencies in charge with maintaining the quality of higher education released new lists of international databases which mattered for preferment, depending on the academic field in which the person activates. For example, a couple of years ago, if you wanted to reach a better position as a philosophy teacher, you had to publish a number of articles (the number being dependent on the position you aspired at) in journals indexed simultaneously in three of the following seven databases: ISI Web of Knowledge, ERIH, Scopus, Ebsco, Jstor, ProQuest or ProMuse. As mentioned, the approved databases for other fields were different. Needless to say, there was not a real debate around what databases should be on this list or even if this idea was really profitable for the quality of Romanian higher education.

In this context, many people working in higher education and aspiring to get to better positions started “hunting” for journals in which to publish so as it would count for their publication list and, in reverse, many of these journals (we are speaking of the Romanian ones) started seeing in this hunt an opportunity to get the much needed funds in order to support the printing, the website and, among other things, to assure some financial gratification for the editors. Unfortunately, because Romanian habits die hard and find their way even in this environment, some of the journals either got too greedy and started charging too much for the possibilities of young aspiring authors (see the case of printing houses which charge for ISBNs in my previous editorial), either used dubious standards for publishing papers (such as the network of friends – “I publish you if you cite me” –, the recommendation from someone in an influent position, the quid pro quo – “I’ll publish your paper if you publish mine” – a.s.o). Thus, many of the Romanian journals, even if they started as decent and trustworthy initiatives, slowly got to be levers for influence and benefits in the academic world.

But this is not the only way to ruin the basic idea behind academic journals; by definition, devaluing is equal to inflation. How do you cause inflation in the academic journal world? By overpopulating the market with journal titles. Obviously, in a normal and free market, quality and, thus, desirability of the products correlated with the general demand for those specific products would lead to the success or failure of the competitors until the market would be in a state of relative equilibrium. Unfortunately, the market, in our case, does not obey the general laws of economics. While trying to measure the most successful journals by their impact factor, you meet more than one exception to the rule of quantitative impact, especially for most of the fields outside exact sciences. Thus, for social sciences or, even better, for humanities, regional, linguistic and cultural specific makes it almost impossible to speak of continent-wide appreciation for a certain journal, therefore losing the interest of reputable and respectable databases which would measure the real impact (citations, reach etc.). In other words, it is really difficult to distinguish the legitimately successful journals in these fields. From the other side, it is even more difficult to start a journal (if you feel, for instance, that the other journals existing in your
field, in your country or region, do not represent your vision), persuade people that you mean serious business and get authors to write decent articles for the journal.

And, if things weren’t difficult enough, the cherry on top of this matter is represented by predatory journals, a phenomenon which tends to get somehow out of hand. According to the definition given by researcher Jeffrey Beall (Elliott, 2012), predatory publishing represents the practice of charging publication fees to authors without giving any of the services usually offered by reputable publishers, such as peer-review, quality control, academic standards etc. In Beall’s words, “predatory open-access publishers are those that unprofessionally exploit the gold open-access model for their own profit. That is to say, they operate as scholarly vanity presses and publish articles in exchange for the author fee. They are characterized by various level of deception and lack of transparency in their operations”. While mimicking the appearance of legitimate journals, predatory journals invent pompous names for themselves, make up strange impact factors (to create the impression of being indexed in the Thomson Reuters index), list respectable people in their editorial board, usually without getting their permission; most of all, predatory journals charge impressive amounts of money for publishing any kind of article, thus devaluing the whole competition in academic environments all over the world (at least everywhere where the people in charge with evaluating teachers are not capable to discern between a paper published in a serious journals when compared with a predatory journal paper; in all fairness, even if the evaluators mean good it would mean an enormous amount of time to check every title listed in people’s publications lists). To create at least a sketched picture of the phenomenon, let me list the invitations to published received by me in the last two weeks: Kasmera ISI Journal, Research Journal of Educational Studies Review, Bothalia Journal, Revistas Academicas, Wulenia ISI Journal, Ciencia e Tecnica, Journal of Social Science for Policy Implications, Review of Arts and Humanities, International Journal for Innovation Education and Research, several “International Journal of Research in ….”, Sylwan Journal and a couple of others which I deleted instantly. Even more, we got great news from “Scientific Journal Impact Factor” which informed us that Annales Philosophici “was positively evaluated in the SJIF Journals Master List evaluation process, which resulted in a score given SJIF 2012 = 2.772 (Scientific Journal Impact Factor Value for 2012)”. Without even asking for such an evaluation! Wow! Since this topic is so interesting, I shall return to it in a future editorial, but I feel the need to add that some of the above mentioned names are not only predatory journals, but rather hijacked journals and accessing them in order to publish is not only unethical, but potentially dangerous for your personal finances (see more in Jalalian and Mahboobi, 2014).

The main question is: is there any way to clean the system and make it reliable once again or the damage done so far will only grow and make any kind of initiatives doomed from the start?

References