Asian journals are doin’ it for themselves

The 1985 hit song, “Sisters Are Doin’ It for Themselves,” recorded by the UK duo Eurythmics and the US soul artist Aretha Franklin became a feminist anthem marking the idea that women did not need the support or permission of men in order to take charge of their destinies. They could define success on their own terms.

Scientific publishers, researchers, scholars, clinicians, grant-making bodies, and other voices within and connected to academic, scientific, and medical literature and information publishing have been grappling with similar opportunities and challenges with respect to reliance on traditional publishers since the advent of the new information age.

The journal Nature introduced a 2013 special issue on “The Future of Publishing” with this observation:

After nearly 400 years in the slow-moving world of print, the scientific publishing enterprise is suddenly being thrust into a fast-paced online world of cloud computing, crowd sourcing and ubiquitous sharing. Long-established practices are being challenged by new ones.

This issue is the Asian Journal of Anesthesiology’s last to be published under our contract with the multinational publishing conglomerate, Elsevier. Just as the average person only needs a keyboard and an internet connection to spread their voice around the world, medical journal publishers can now easily access tools that let us publish for ourselves. This brings new independence and freedom, and new sets of challenges.

To find our bearings and chart our course, we look upwards, downwards, forwards, backwards, inwards, and outwards. Certainly, we respect much in and about those journals in anesthesia and in other medical fields that are widely-seen as the best and most important, and in several ways we strive to emulate them.

Most of us associate a sense of trust with the big, recognized, and prestigious names. But how much of that is based on reality, and how much on illusion? We have spent several months strongly focused on serious criticisms of what we can call the scientific/academic publishing establishment, from both within and without. Serious and compelling charges—of corruption in various forms, the systematic positioning of profit-seeking over good science and public service, the exclusion of important voices, exploitation and fraud in traditional peer-review systems, gamification of “impact factor” evaluations, “predatory journals”, and in general, bad science and bad science policy—levelled by parties from both within and outside of the establishment, have been compellingly pronounced. These have been raised or reviewed in some of our recent editorials and elsewhere.

We can do better than aiming to climb upwards into the current scholarly communications establishment. Our independence, limited resources, and location in Asia—where researchers, professionals, and others generally don’t speak English as a native language—impose constraints, and difficult and frustrating ones; but these same constraints also force us to question and to explore. We believe this is ultimately good, and we continue with our experiments.

We have both expanded and focused our mission. The global scientific research establishment is very much an American/Western oligarchical empire. Paradoxically, it aims to capitalize on a rising Asia, and simultaneously to shut us out. NEJM Group, for example, the publisher of the New England Journal of Medicine, announced an initiative in partnership with a Shanghai-based company last year, and in 2011 announced a partnership with the Dutch mega-publishing conglomerate Wolters Kluwer to close access to the NEJM though paywalls.

We remain committed to open access. While producing high-quality peer-reviewed research and other content that serves our readership requires resources, we agree with the critics of the status quo: A system run and controlled by large publishers in pursuit of profits is incompatible with a scientific enterprise that places our mission first: Advancing the capability of anesthesiologists and improving the lives of anesthesiologists and the communities we serve.

Watch for the new website on which our next issue will be published, and join the conversations we aim to stimulate as we evolve moving forward.

Conflict of interest

None declared.

References


https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aja.2017.12.001
2468-824X/© 2017 Taiwan Society of Anesthesiologists. Published by Elsevier Taiwan LLC. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Wei-Zen Sun*, James L. Reynolds
Department of Anesthesiology, College of Medicine, National Taiwan University, 7 Chungshan South Rd, 10002 Taipei, Taiwan
* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: wzsun@ntu.edu.tw (W.-Z. Sun).

6 December 2017