

The moral schizophrenia in the fight against Big Publisha

Ali H. Al-Hoorie¹

¹*Royal Commission for Jubail and Yanbu*

Article history

Received: May 2, 2024

Accepted: May 2, 2024

Online: July 5, 2024

Corresponding author

Ali H. Al-Hoorie, hoorie_a@rcjy.edu.sa

Acknowledgements

Author contributions

Statement of interest

Statement of technology use

Supporting information

See p. 6

As a thought experiment, I invite readers to recall the following historical facts: Before slavery was abolished, people across both the North and South of the USA advocated for slavery, and even rationalized it. Their rationalizations included the following:

- 1) Slavery had been around since ancient times, accepted and practiced by respectable, revered, and religious figures in history, so why raise any questions about its morality?
- 2) Slavery was an economic necessity without which there would be widespread unemployment leading to social chaos, and the economy would eventually collapse.
- 3) Slaveholders were benevolent toward their slaves, providing them with subsistence and shelter. Slavery was actually beneficial for the slaves themselves; it was not just right but also necessary for them. In fact, it was argued that “slavery was on balance a blessing” (Brophy, 2016, p. 242).

Slavery and its rationalizations were not unique to the US context. The same arguments were used by slave owners all over the world because of the human tendency to rationalize the current state of affairs, or the status quo bias. While this analogy may strike some readers as odd, I argue that parallel axiologies, ontologies, epistemologies, visions, logic, and interests are used today in academic publishing to maintain the status quo in favor of what I call *Big Publisha* (which I use as analogous to Big Pharma). Consider, for instance, these arguments:

- 1) Publishers have supported academia for a long time, and respected figures in academia continue to contribute to their journals and books, so why would this industry suddenly be seen as unethical?
- 2) Publishers provide essential financial, logistic, administrative, and symbolic support to maintain journals and books, and without it academic publishing would collapse.
- 3) Publishers benevolently sponsor conferences and scholarships and graciously offer discounts, bundling agreements, and free or reduced-access access to certain regions.

Considering these parallels, I argue that it is not much of a stretch to make comparisons between the publishing industry and modern slavery, at least for scholars in the Global South. In legal terms, modern slavery refers to a variety of exploitative conditions such as involuntary domestic servitude, early marriage, debt bondage, and forced labor, with some estimating that there are about 50 million slaves worldwide today. What is common among these conditions is that the individual does not have alternative options. In academia, researchers obtain public funding, do the hard work of conducting research and reporting it, and then submit the fruits of their labor to the journal for free (or *they* are required to pay exorbitant fees for the privilege of publishing), where they also do the reviewing and sometimes editing work of the journal for free, and finally they buy it back from Big Publisha – all in the age of the internet and advanced technology that provides affordable and nearly instantaneous publishing options. The authors themselves get nothing from the profit, while Big Publisha strategically brainwashes them into doublethink, convincing them that it is actually their ethical, moral, and professional duty to review for these journals *pro bono* as a contribution to knowledge generation and quality control in the field. These conditions apply equally to researchers from both the Global North and South, though many in the Global North may be oblivious to it because they can access the research literature they need through their university subscriptions. Global South researchers, in contrast, usually struggle to access academic literature, and at the same time they cannot afford to avoid Big Publisha journals, or avoid using English, which is not their mother tongue, if they want their voices heard by their academic communities. Many Global South institutions also require publications in high-ranking journals for the purposes of employment and promotions. Global South academics are therefore trapped in this exploitative system – all to the substantial financial gains of Big Publisha.

I believe that, just like slavery, people in the future will look back in outrage, horror, and disgust at this situation and how it was rationalized before paywalls were “abolished.” I agree wholeheartedly with Andringa et al.’s (2024) argument regarding the moral obligation that researchers, particularly senior ones, have in redressing this state of affairs. Access to learning, knowledge, and scholarship constitutes an unalienable human right (UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 2020). Nevertheless, I also

believe that relying on the goodwill of researchers to spontaneously engage in this reform movement may be too optimistic. Global North researchers are not the ones directly afflicted by this system, and so meaningful action to reform it may be slow. Real change, if it occurs, will most likely require a multi-year and multi-pronged push – metaphorically comparable to the Civil War struggle – against the oligopoly and its various manifestations, as Big Publisha with its army of lawyers, consultants, and strategists will not passively acquiesce and will apply every trick up their sleeves to maintain their business model and its enormous profits.

In this piece, I propose a three-stage roadmap to achieve diamond open access status fieldwide. I see this moral project in line with recent advocacy that positions and frames open access as an ethical imperative (De Costa, 2024; Plonsky, 2024). A primary element of this ethical project is citation practices. Since research that violates ethical principles should be retracted regardless of its rigor (COPE Council, 2019), citing unethical research could be seen as equally problematic. This is because citation additionally marks the credibility of the researchers, the process of publication, and the publication venue. (Incidentally, this is also why citing research from predatory journals is questionable.) To take another historical example, there is significant controversy surrounding the ethics of citing findings from Nazi research that have survived, despite the demise of the Nazis many decades ago. Indeed, it is not hard to imagine similar ethical questions arising from relying on and citing hypothetical research findings from ISIS in Syria, the US Public Health Service at Tuskegee, and torture in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, or in Abu Ghraib, Iraq (Caplan, 2021), where the involvement of academics in such atrocities has caused a considerable outcry (e.g., see the Hoffman Report; Hoffman et al., 2015). Perhaps the most moderate position in this regard is to “use the findings only in circumstances where the scientific validity is clear and where there is no alternative source of information” (Moe, 1984, p. 7).

1 A three-stage roadmap

Stage 1 of this roadmap is preparation. This is comparable to what Andringa et al. (2024) have proposed. It includes establishing new diamond open access journals, supporting them by proactively submitting, citing, and proposing special issues, as well as flipping journals that are not owned by publishers (e.g., *Language Learning*, *Modern Language Journal*, *TESOL Quarterly*) to the field’s own associations who can guarantee diamond open access. It also involves lobbying associations and libraries to commit to sponsoring these journals. This stage also encompasses curating lists of diamond open access journals (e.g., <https://www.ali-alhoorie.com/applied-linguistics-open-access-journals>), so that researchers gain awareness of the alternative options available. I also agree with Andringa et al. (2024) that the launch of *Research Methods in Applied Linguistics* under Elsevier was a missed opportunity for open access schol-

arship and the newly-paywalled restriction by Elsevier is a regrettable step in the wrong direction.

This preparation stage is crucial before moving to the next stage can have a meaningful impact. Admittedly, I myself routinely contribute to and engage with Big Publisha journals, and halting such contributions will only harm my own career. The same is true for most colleagues. The field needs to reach critical mass. I view this as a *temporary excuse* (albeit one not devoid of ethical implications). However, once this critical mass is reached with plenty of equally ranked diamond open access alternatives available, failing to move to the next logical step would be a symptom of moral schizophrenia: recognizing the unethical nature of the very existence of these publishers but not recognizing the ethical issues in continuing to uncritically support them.

Stage 2 is migration, focusing primarily on citation practices. Impact factors constitute an important element of the allure of many Big Publisha journals (Xu et al., 2023), and citations serve as the lifeblood of these impact factors. This means that we researchers hold the power. Targeting citations may be a more effective strategy than outright boycotting of journals, a lesson learned from the Cost of Knowledge initiative (see Al-Hoorie & Hiver, 2023), especially considering that citation in academia is, for all intents and purposes, already gamed to death (Al-Hoorie & Hiver, in press; Macdonald, 2022). Refraining from citing Big Publisha journals, particularly articles published in the last two years (the period that actually counts toward impact factor calculation), on ethical grounds would strategically lower these impact factors. In many cases in applied linguistics, not citing research from specific Big Publisha journals within the most recent two years should not pose a significant challenge or be met with too much objection, and exceptions can still be made when no alternatives are available – as argued by Moe (1984). These exceptions will most likely be needed in rare cases, given the numerous alternatives established at Stage 1, with the majority of senior scholars having already migrated to these alternatives. The groundwork will have been laid. The outcome of this stage is a sustained decrease in the impact factors of Big Publisha journals and an increase in the impact factors of diamond open access journals (as citations are redirected to them), all the while discouraging still-hesitant authors from contributing to Big Publisha. In brief, Stage 2 aims to make contributing indiscriminately to Big Publisha increasingly stigmatized.

At Stage 3, with the established infrastructure in place and the incentives realigned, the field will be ready to up its game. This stage involves associations and institutions formally and proactively discouraging their members from publishing or engaging in Big Publisha journals. “Violators” will face consequences (e.g., in hiring, promotion, and tenure) as they will be asked to justify why they have decided to support these journals. These researchers would be intentionally providing their research labor to for-profit publishers pro bono to keep them behind paywalls despite the availability of alternatives – in effect siding with Big Publisha.

If history is any indication, it is possible that Stage 3 will also witness the rise of grassroots activism spontaneously. Open scholarship advocates might deal with violators

Table 1 The three-stage roadmap

Stage 1	Field Preparation	Providing alternatives: Setting up and supporting diamond journals to provide alternatives to closed-access ones
Stage 2	Citation Migration	Rerouting citations: Refraining from citing articles published closed-access journals in the previous two years, unless it is unavoidable
Stage 3	Formal Activism	Holding researchers accountable: Consequences to those who insist on contributing to closed-access journals without a valid reason

through direct advocacy campaigns that send repeated and targeted messages to them, their collaborators, and superiors informing them of their unethical actions, championing the alternatives in the field's publishing ecosystem, and using various disincentives to hold them accountable. Indeed, we have seen in recent years similar activism for lesser causes, with individuals in higher ranking positions in academia forced to resign or to rethink and reform their positions as a result.

Nevertheless, at Stage 3 it should be obvious that Big Publisha journals are, from a purely pragmatic viewpoint, no longer an attractive option given their lower impact factors and limited circulation due to paywalls – even without the need to consider the ethical issues involved. Once this infrastructure for open access publishing is established and the incentives are realigned, one has to be suffering from moral schizophrenia if they justify publishing in closed-access journals (“I agree that these journals are unethical, and I agree that there is no pressing academic value to support or cite them, but I still see no problem in doing that”). The three-stage roadmap is summarized in Table 1.

2 Conclusion

I have a dream, a dream of ethical and equitable scholarship where readers from both the Global North and South have equal access to academic literature and empirical knowledge. Following the footsteps and inspiration of the visionary advocate for 20th century civil rights, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., I remind readers that access to knowledge and education is a fundamental human right, and paywalls represent a blatant violation of that right.

This commentary has presented one perspective from the Global South. Readers from the Global North may not appreciate the struggles of Global South scholars, and many may be appalled by the idea of making parallels to modern slavery. But Global South issues should not be reframed to accommodate Global North sensibilities, which would be a form of epistemic violence (Barnawi & R'boul, 2024). I cannot tell whether this

proposal will ever reach fruition, and I would be naïve to set timelines as it necessitates the collective responsibility of the entire field, and particularly the proactive action by Global South scholars themselves. The future will look back at people surprised by this proposal just as we look back as people surprised by the idea of emancipation.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Phil Hiver, Luke Plonsky, and Othman Barnawi for their feedback on an earlier draft. Views expressed here are mine only.

Author contributions

Ali H. Al-Hoorie: Conceptualization; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing.

Statement of interest

The author(s) have declared that there were no conflicting interests.

Statement of technology use

No AI-based generative technology was used in the preparation of this manuscript and the execution of the research that the manuscript reports upon.

Supporting information

None.

References

- Al-Hoorie, A.H., & Hiver, P. (2023). The Postprint Pledge – Toward a culture of researcher-driven initiatives: A commentary on “(Why) are open research practices the future for the study of language learning?”. *Language Learning*, 73(S2), 388–391. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lang.12577>
- Al-Hoorie, A.H., & Hiver, P. (in press). Open science in applied linguistics: An introduction to metascience. In L. Plonsky (Ed.), *Open science in applied linguistics*. Applied Linguistics Press.
- Andringa, S., Mos, M., van Beuningen, C., González, P., Hornikx, J., & Steinkrauss, R. (2024). Diamond is a scientist's best friend: Counteracting systemic inequality in open access publishing. *Dutch Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 13. <https://doi.org/10.51751/dujal18802>
- Barnawi, O.Z., & R'boul, H. (2024). Against epistemological theft and appropriation in applied linguistics research. *Applied Linguistics Review*, Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1515/applirev-2024-0008>
- Brophy, A.L. (2016). *University, court, and slave: Pro-slavery thought and southern colleges and the coming of Civil War*. Oxford University Press.
- Caplan, A.L. (2021). How should we regard information gathered in Nazi experiments? *AMA Journal of Ethics*, 23(1), 55–58. <https://doi.org/10.1001/amajethics.2021.55>
- COPE Council. (2019). COPE retraction guidelines – English. <https://doi.org/10.24318/cope.2019.1.4>
- De Costa, P.I. (2024). What's ethics got to do with applied linguistics? Revisiting the past, con-

- sidering the present, and being optimistic about the future of our field. *Research Methods in Applied Linguistics*, 3(1), 100103. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rmal.2024.100103>
- Hoffman, D.H., Carter, D.J., Lopez, C.R.V., Benziller, H.L., Guo, A.X., Latifi, S.Y., & Craig, D.C. (2015). *Report to the Special Committee of the board of directors of the American Psychological Association: Independent review relating to APA ethics guidelines, national security interrogations, and torture*. <http://www.apa.org/independent-review/APA-FINAL-Report-7.2.15.pdf>
- Macdonald, S. (2022). The gaming of citation and authorship in academic journals: A warning from medicine. *Social Science Information*, 61(4), 457–480. <https://doi.org/10.1177/05390184221142218>
- Moe, K. (1984). Should the Nazi research data be cited? *Hastings Center Report*, 14(6), 5–7. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3561733>
- Plonsky, L. (2024). Study quality as an intellectual and ethical imperative: A proposed framework. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190524000059>
- UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. (2020). *General comment No. 25 (2020) on science and economic, social and cultural rights (article 15 (1) (b), (2), (3) and (4) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights)*. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3899847>
- Xu, Y., Zhuang, J., Blair, R., Kim, A.I., Li, F., Hernández, R.T., & Plonsky, L. (2023). Modeling quality and prestige in applied linguistics journals: A bibliometric and synthetic analysis. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*, 13(4), 755–779. <https://doi.org/10.14746/ssl.40215>