

Openwashing and greenwashing in academic publishing

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See p. 3

“*Diamond open access is the only way forward*”, Andringa and colleagues (2024, p. 9) write. In their viewpoint paper, they provide an analysis of systemic inequality in academic publishing, argue for a new publication model in which Diamond open access is the default, and provide a route map for getting there. The authors, who form the editorial board of DuJAL, have put their beliefs into practice by turning DuJAL into a Diamond open access journal.

I fully endorse Andringa et al.’s position. While the problems in the current academic publishing system might seem overwhelming, the paper provides a point on the horizon to aim for. Particularly welcome are the pointers to concrete and feasible steps that we scholars can undertake, both as a community and at the individual level. I also believe that transforming DuJAL into Diamond has been a formidable step.

In this response paper, I will discuss two pitfalls of the current publication system, that I will call *openwashing and greenwashing in academic publishing*.

1 Openwashing

In 2009, the term “openwashing” was coined to mean: “*to spin a product or company as open, although it is not*” (Thorne, 2009). It was named after “greenwashing” (Thorne, 2009), which was derived from “whitewashing” in 1986 (Kurze & Lamont, 2022). While the term “openwashing” is not commonly used in the context of academic publishing, a recent student paper in library sciences (Waugh & Carlisle-Johnston, 2023) suggests that it should be. The paper calls for more research into the way academic publishers use

openness as a marketing strategy by presenting their services as open while not actually reflecting open values, to the publishers' commercial benefit. The examples cited are both funny and disturbing – with over-the-top claims about the quality of the publishers' work, their peer review procedures, and their indispensable role as selfless frontrunners of the open movement.

Vague and unsubstantiated claims, and the presentation of clients as partners, are among the common tactics that academic publishers have used to give authors the false impression of supporting and enabling openness (Waugh & Carlisle-Johnston, 2023). Let me use the review procedure of Frontiers, publisher of a large chain of Gold open access journals, as an example. It looks fantastic on paper: *“Our collaborative peer review process maximizes quality while ensuring researchers' rights to submit their work for a rigorous, constructive, and transparent review”*, Frontiers (2024) claims. It also seems to suggest partnership: *“Editors and reviewers work with the authors to improve their manuscript”* (Frontiers, 2024).

This is in sharp contrast with controversies about Frontiers' reliability. Many researchers have expressed the opinion that Frontiers should be considered as predatory or semi-predatory (see, e.g., discussions on www.reddit.com; Frontiers' inclusion in *Beall's List of Potential Predatory Journals and Publishers* in 2015, <https://beallist.net>; but see: Bloudoff-Indelicato, 2015). Major criticism concerns the way Frontiers handles reviews that do not recommend publication: *“it feels like Frontiers is pressuring negative reviewers to withdraw from the review process, so that they can be replaced”* (Thenaterator, 2023). *“Their “open review” policy where reviewers' names are published with the papers (...) gets negative reviewers to withdraw from reviewing”* (Vector_osu, 2023). Guest editors (who handle most Frontiers papers; Petrou, 2023), have expressed concerns about being unable to reject manuscripts because Frontiers' in-house editors overruled rejection decisions, presumably to secure the Article Processing Charge upon acceptance (Vector_osu, 2023). Another concern is that reviewers and editors spend disproportionate amounts of time on Frontiers manuscripts due to the expectation that they should *work on* rather than review or handle them.

Contrary to the impressive marketing claims, the reviewing system thus seems unclear and unfair for all involved: reviewers and editors are maneuvered into disempowered positions, authors and readers are misled about the quality of the journal they entrust their precious manuscript or reading time to.

2 Greenwashing

Like openwashing, the term “greenwashing” is not commonly used in the context of academic publishing. It is used to refer to misleading communication about climate and sustainability: *“Greenwashing presents a significant obstacle to tackling climate change. By misleading the public to believe that a company or other entity is doing more to protect*

the environment than it is, greenwashing promotes false solutions to the climate crisis that distract from and delay concrete and credible action" (United Nations, 2024).

In a similar vein, Andringa and colleagues (2024) argue that the Green open access publication model (which allows authors to share in an open repository a pre-final version of manuscripts that are published as closed, Bronze, or Gold) might stand in the way of progress in the domain of academic publishing. It treats symptoms, thereby reducing the incentive to treat the underlying problems in academic publishing. Because of the similarities in word form and meaning, I propose to extend the meaning of "greenwashing" to include concerns that the Green open access publication model is presented as more beneficial for openness than it is.

One specific problem of Green open access publication is "*the circulation of multiple versions of papers and the absence of peer-review quality checks*" (Andringa et al., 2024, p. 7; cf. Marsden & Morgan-Short, 2023). I would like to suggest civil disobedience as a solution to this problem. Rather than a pre-final version, individual researchers could choose to make the final, formatted, published version of their papers freely available in open repositories. I have done this for my own papers for seventeen years now, sharing them on my personal website www.mirjambroersma.nl. So far, I have not received any complaints from publishers yet. This pragmatic solution, of course, does not tackle the structural problems in academic publishing any more than Green publication does.

3 Conclusion

For-profit publishers do not have the same interests as researchers. A better understanding of the commercial mechanisms at work in academic publishing can help us make informed decisions on where to put our time, money, and trust. Further research (e.g., on openwashing by academic publishers; Waugh & Carlisle-Johnston, 2023) is much needed, as is awareness raising. Andringa et al.'s (2024) viewpoint paper is therefore very timely and welcome.

Author contributions

Mirjam Broersma: Conceptualization; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing.

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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.

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