

Peer pressure

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Winnie-the-Pooh [1] opens with the memorable words, “Here is Edward Bear, coming downstairs now, bump, bump, bump, on the back of his head, behind Christopher Robin. It is, as far as he knows, the only way of coming downstairs, but sometimes he feels that there really is another way, if only he could stop bumping for a moment and think of it. And then he feels that perhaps there isn’t.”

Conventional academic journals are an interesting phenomenon. They receive gratuitous submissions from researchers, whereupon the manuscripts received are assessed by unpaid, hopefully disinterested, researchers. If read at all, published papers are read by yet more researchers. Thus all value-adding contributions are made by willing members of the academic community who invest their time for the benefit of all; yet the end product is sold by publishing houses to librarians who purchase it on behalf of the very people who have done all the work. Or have they?

The ease and speed of archiving and the ability to promote one’s work could indicate that there is little demonstrable value to be gained from publishing in traditional journals. If this were true, submissions would be declining. Are they?

Persistent growth in submissions indicates that conventional journals offer a service academics consider of worth. Journal prestige is coupled to the perceived quality of the peer review; so one might deduce that journals would seek to improve this service. Overseeing peer review and the quality stamp provided by this review are the services most valued by scientists. Yet, without the willing participation of already overburdened researchers, peer review would collapse. In this respect, it is noteworthy that peer review impinges increasingly on academics’ time, directly affecting researchers. Thus, a healthy discourse should be taking place between scientists, editorial boards and publishing houses with the aim of designing the service academics desire and addressing researchers’ concerns. This does not appear to be happening.

Are you too busy being bumped down those stairs to give the matter much thought, or would you prefer to hear about recent developments in peer review and to make a central contribution to the evolution of a service provided by you and for you?

[1] A.A. Milne “Winnie-the-Pooh”, Puffin, 1988.