For a cornea surgeon performing deep anterior lamellar keratoplasty, seeing a big bubble form is a welcome sight but seeing one burst can be devastating. The talk of the times though is about other bigger bubbles that have formed and collapsed. Dot coms and Bit coins are examples that immediately come to mind. However, these are the last things on my mind when I write this editorial to launch the first issue of the Journal of the European society of cornea and ocular surface disease specialists (JEuCornea).

No one can escape noticing the booming bubble of online journals that threaten to engulf scientific peer review publishing as we know it. There is not a day that goes by without receiving a request to join the editorial board of a prestigious new journal or contribute an article, often the last article that is required to complete an issue of an even more prestigious journal. Adjectives like honourable, esteemed, opinion leader, world leader, dynamic and insightful personality, are used to describe the individual to whom the request is being made; basically, anyone who has published an article or even an abstract. Further reading of the email reveals the heavy discount, up to 85% of the cost of publication, that is offered but still requires the ‘honourable world leader’ to pay a sum that exceeds the thousand figure regardless of the currency quoted. The term “predatory journals” (PJs) is used to describe these publications. A long and ever-growing list of these can be found through any search engine though it is likely that some genuine articles are caught in the wide net cast by the composers of the lists.

Running in parallel and complementing the booming bubble of PJs is the bubble of ‘connived conferences’ (CCs). Invitations to deliver keynote talks at international or world meetings on all sorts of subjects continuously clutter the inbox. The invited speaker is expected to pay the registration fee and the delegates are of course expected to pay to listen to the esteemed invited speakers. Both PJs and CCs, perhaps emboldened by their success, are shamelessly assuming titles and names that are very similar to established high quality journals and conferences, in what appears to be a conscious attempt to mislead the common punter. It has become a booming industry where there is money to be made. The promise of rapid review and publication, often within two weeks, is the tantalising bait but defies the notion of satisfactory peer review. It is not surprising that many an unwary researcher or scientist, eager to see their work published or to speak before a learned audience, have fallen prey to the predators. This is more likely when the personal number of publications and presentations influence the researcher’s promotion or pay progression.

Why is this happening? And what can be done about it? The obvious answer to the first question is the digital age we live in where online publication has become easier, cheaper and widely accessible and exploitable as is evident with the PJs. However, as journal editors, reviewers and publishers of ‘quality journals’ we have to look beyond the obvious; we have to look within. Almost all bonafide high quality journals charge authors at various stages from submission to publication. These charges can include a non-refundable administration fee at submission, a page charge, colour print charges and yes, a hefty charge comparable to the PJs for open access. Some have the audacity to class the publication as an “advertisement” because the author has paid a fee to have the work published. Making a commercial or financial argument against PJs is difficult.

Most of the established journals clearly attract more submissions than they have capacity for and take pride in publishing their low acceptance rates of up to 25-30%. The prevailing peer review process can at best be described as imperfect and at worst inconsistent and subject to the vagaries of individual bias, prejudice, politics and opinion of the humans that contribute to the process. Authors are often left wondering why their papers were rejected when ‘lesser material’ has been published in previous issues of the journal. Explanations offered for rejections-without-review or with relatively good reviews are standard statements like “not suitable for our readership”, “low priority for the journal” “too specialised” etc, which are unhelpful especially given that they can equally apply to examples of papers published in previous issues when compared to the manuscript in question. The time taken from submission-to-decision following peer review is unduly long despite efforts by editors to expedite the process. The published average decision times from submission-to-decision for all submissions is deceptively low as it is massaged downwards by including the rejection score (though such a metric does not exist) before acceptance and rapid publication are other marketing statements like “not suitable for our readership”, “low priority for the journal” “too specialised” etc.

The bottom line is to publish quality work, in quality journals in a timely manner. The authors and their employers spend a lot of time,
money, effort, energy and what else, in undertaking the work, writing the manuscript and submitting it in a ‘ready-made’ format to the publisher’s journal. One must also factor in the time and effort in writing and obtaining grant funding to support the work. The editor spends his/her time and that of their institutional employer in reading, deciding, sorting and assigning papers to section editors, who in turn spend more time in finding appropriate peer reviewers. Publishers have large data bases of peer-reviewers from which the (sub)editors can pick. It is not uncommon for a junior resident to be contacted by a journal to undertake a peer review. The peer-reviewers’ list is loosely scrutinised but there is no formal accreditation or vetting of peer reviewers. Peer reviewers undertake the assigned task in their own time and/or that of their employers. They are always given a time frame to return the review but quite often take their own time. A minimum of two and at times 3 peer reviewers are involved. Theirs decisions are considered by the (sub)editor who makes a recommendation to the editor who makes the final decision and communicates it to the author. A substantial and very significant amount of time and expertise is spent in the process. This incurs a considerable cost to the individuals and institutions involved. Who benefits from it financially? The publisher. More time (money) is spent when the paper is accepted and put through the publication process. The authors assign all copyright to the publisher who makes more money from downloads and other forms of access. When the author requires to re-use the published material he/she has to seek permission and may have to pay for the privilege. The editorial board is usually made of honorary appointees who hold other day jobs. Some board members may get paid a token honorarium but peer-reviewers, the key link in the chain of quality assurance, usually do not. In short, in this model, the publisher is the sole financial beneficiary of a lot of pro bono work. The pressure to make science accessible to all and the infliction of open access charges has opened a new revenue stream.

In my view, this model is not sustainable. “The reason I accept requests to review manuscripts is because someone else is reviewing mine” is a model in which only the publisher cashes in on the time spent. Has anyone costed the true monetary value of a published paper? Moving from the financial to the quality argument, the established journals are on higher ground but not by a great deal. The inconsistencies of the peer review process and the inadequate transparency in acceptance or rejections of manuscripts compromises quality. Good papers, like cream, will always rise to the top no matter where they are published. Modern criteria for measuring impact have made impact-factors relatively irrelevant. Authors’ h-index and the publications’ citations are more important. A good paper, once in the public domain, will be recognised for it is worth and cited for its content. This ongoing form of post-publication peer review is what ultimately makes or breaks a paper and contributes to citation numbers and h-index or at times the demise of the paper which fails peer scrutiny. Looking ahead, do we even need the platform of a journal to publish our work? A personal or institutional or a scientific organisation’s web site might suffice. Provided the title and key words are carefully selected, the paper will be discoverable to any who look for information on the subject matter and the wider peer review process will kick in. Online time and date signatures will establish and demonstrate chronological priority with greater speed. Is that the direction in which this bubble is blowing? The bubble is certainly booming, should it burst, the fallout will be interesting to see.

Why then another journal? JEuCornea will increase capacity in the specialty area and perhaps divert good submissions away from the PJs. As the official organ of a stable society, EuCornea, now in its ninth year, and the support of an editorial board made of named specialty clinicians and scientists with global representation, JEuCornea will have credibility. The association with Elsevier as the publisher and the backing of an international membership will ensure stability. The editorial board opens JEuCornea to the world and invites submissions that concur with its stated aim “to promote the study and learning of the science and practice of all matters related to the health and management of diseases of the cornea, ocular surface, tears and associated tissues of the eye as an organ and as part of the patient as a whole”

Declaration of Interest

The author has no financial conflict of interest to declare in relation to the content of the paper. He is editor of the Journal of EuCornea and the views expressed are his own views.

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