

## **THE PUBLISHING GAME IN ACADEMIC LIFE: Journal Editors' and Authors' Perspectives on Power and Professionalism**

### **Introduction: the contextual and conceptual background**

21<sup>st</sup> century academic working life in most developed countries is firmly located within and shaped by a prominent performativity regime. In the UK the research excellence framework (REF) is currently a principal influence on academic culture – particularly in the pre-1992 university sector. Since publications constitute what is arguably the REF's most significant component, academic journals represent a highly significant feature of the academic landscape, and by extension academic journal editors may be considered to wield immense power. This paper presents selected preliminary findings from a SRHE-funded study whose purpose was to uncover something of the nature and extent of this putative power base.

The 'informal journal caste system' to which Bray and Major (2011, p. 479) refer has become a recognised artefact within the prevalent cultures of research-intensive communities. As Tourish (2011, p. 375) observes, '[journal rankings systems] are increasingly employed for performative ends. Whatever the formal intent, they are used to re-route academic effort down channels more concerned with *prestige and power* than open-ended academic inquiry. *Careers thrive or perish depending on one's skill at playing this particular game.*' (emphasis added). Since, as Weiner (2001) points out, academic publishing is used to inform appointments- and promotions-related decisions, journal editors are effectively the gatekeepers of what is the increasingly competitive and select world inhabited by prolific academics who have succeeded in playing the publishing 'game' (Peters & Ceci, 1982; Colman, 1982; Crandall, 1982). To apply a medieval (and hence sexist) epithet, they may, to all intents and purposes, be considered the 'kingmakers' of the academic community.

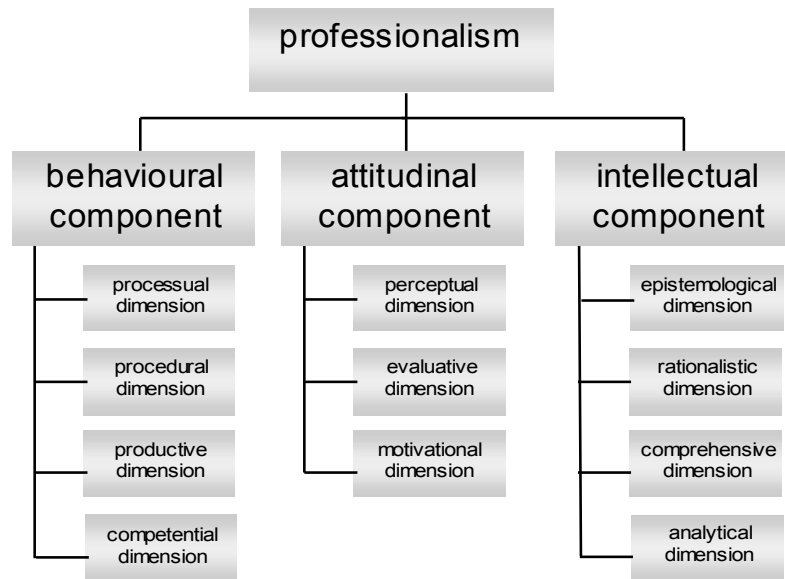
Such issues were examined in the study through the lens of journal editors' *professionalism*. It is important to clarify the interpretation of professionalism that was applied, for it deviates quite considerably from 'everyday' non-academic interpretations of professionalism.

#### *Professionalism: concept and framework*

In the common vernacular, professionalism is typically and traditionally understood as the extent to which individuals practise their profession ethically and commendably, in the best interests of their 'clients' (or those whom they 'serve'). The interpretation of professionalism applied to the study is wider than this and correlates with departures from and modifications to traditional classic conceptualisations of professionalism and criteria for professional status (e.g. Evans, 2013; Evetts 2003; Bottero, 2005, Noordegraaf, 2007, 2013). Conceptualised as encompassing: what practitioners do, how they do it, why they do it, and what attitudes they hold – and whose componential structure is represented in Figure 1, below - professionalism is defined in this paper not as exemplary, but as 'qualitatively neutral', professional practice – 'as something that *is*, rather than as something that *ought* to be' (Evans, 2013, p. 484), rendering redundant the term '*unprofessional*'.

The research was focused on uncovering to what extent and in what ways - if at all – the exercise of power is considered to feature within academic journal editors' enacted professionalism (i.e. their editorial practice as observed, perceived and interpreted).

Figure 1: the componential structure of professionalism, as formulated by Evans (2011)



### **The study: outline of design and method**

The research addressed the following research questions:

1. What is the nature of editorial practice?
2. What are the bases of editors' decisions?
3. What motivates people to become and remain journal editors and what influences (positively and negatively) their motivation, morale and satisfaction?
4. What are the key current and future issues and challenges associated with editorial work, and how are these (or might these) be addressed and/or impact upon the editorial role?
5. What perceptions of the journal editor role, responsibilities and professionalism - and of how these translate into power - are held by: a) editors themselves, and b) aspiring or actual/experienced authors?
6. What defines a proficient journal editor?

An online questionnaire that sought the perspectives of authors (actual and aspiring) representing all disciplines yielded 830 responses. The views of 20 academic journal editors (2 full time, professional, salaried editors and 18 'academics-as-editors') and a sub-sample of 15 authors across a range of disciplines - social sciences, arts and humanities and STEM – were sought through face-to-face interviews.

### **Overview of main findings**

The study uncovered relatively little support and justification for casting and portraying journal editors as excessively powerful gatekeepers who jealously guard and control ingress into, and progression within, the academy. Certainly, some of the vignettes and observations collected from authors displayed frustration, irritation, disappointment, anger and incredulity – but such perceptions will very likely feature in any similar kind of study that seeks first-hand accounts of workplace relations and collegial interaction.

The overall picture to emerge was one of what is generally accepted as an imperfect system (of academic journal publishing) operating in an imperfect world, but a system that, barring the occasional hiccup, is fit for purpose, partly because those who play key roles in perpetuating it – journal editors – are essentially well-intentioned, conscientious, hard-working and proficient. Such perceptions notwithstanding, there was widespread recognition that editors inevitably wield power – some considerably more than others – but that this is generally not a malevolent or oppressive form of agency. Editors themselves tended to play down or to explain away and justify their power; one described himself as a ‘guardian’ of the field; others evidently deflected some of their potency into their empowerment of authors.

The nature of the editorial professionalism that authors were revealed as wanting or expecting is predictably focused on better meeting authors’ needs by greater editorial responsiveness. Authors’ wish-list includes, *inter alia*: more timely decisions on submissions, more transparency around editorial decision-making, more editorial accountability, and more fairness. Above all, authors seem, for the most part, to want editors to take on more of what they (authors) perceive as editorial work: more thorough reading of submissions and more decision-making without excessive reviewer input. It is editors, many respondents argued, not reviewers, who should make the final, post-resubmission, decision on whether or not the paper is publishable; reviewers should be used as advisors, not as proxies for the editor.

The ‘shape’ of ‘demanded’ or ‘requested’ editorial professionalism thus differs from that of ‘enacted’ editorial professionalism principally in relation to its productive, processual and, to some extent, procedural, elements: editors are effectively being ‘asked’ to take on more of the tasks that they typically delegate to reviewers and to explain fully and promptly what influenced the ways in which they carried out those tasks. It also differs in relation to the comprehensive element, for if editors are to be expected to take on more of the decision making that they have traditionally delegated to reviewers, their substantive - and in many cases, methodological - knowledge would in most cases need to be considerably widened; as one academic-as-editor remarked, ‘I take the point the reviewers are supposed to be simply *advising* the editor, but, I’m only an expert in some areas ... I *have* to rely on the reviewers’ comments; they are invited precisely because it’s their precise area’. The professional salaried editors, on the other hand, highlighted their own extensive knowledge bases which, they emphasised, was integral to their work and required continuous library research.

### **Issues for discussion**

Is professional, salaried, editorship the way forward for a 21<sup>st</sup> century academic world that with each passing year seems to sit increasingly easily at the juncture with the commercial, market-led world? Would the academy be better served by such an evolution? Or would such an initiative lead to the lowering of academic standards, with the commercial sector popularising and dumbing down the currency of the knowledge economy that would be squeezed within its tightening grip? Is professional academic journal editing in fact commercially feasible outside the STEMM disciplines? And if the evolution towards mass full-time professional journal editorship seems a step too far, then could halfway measures offer an acceptable compromise, with the commercial sector - the publishers – committing much greater proportions of their profits to financing considerably more support for journal editors than has hitherto been the case? Such issues will be discussed in the conference paper.

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