

A once great journal becomes a Kafka-esque nightmare.

Some years ago, a bunch of funders, publishers and scientists decided that the old model of journal publishing, in which one sent manuscripts to a journal and they decided to accept or reject on the grounds of how interesting the manuscript seems to be, as well on the grounds of the robustness of the work, was fundamentally flawed. The problems were that it is always difficult to know how significant research will be, and there was always a serious risk of Old Boys' Club behaviour with reviewers always favouring people who think the way they do, rather than favouring new approaches. Back in the days of 'dead tree publishing' (journals being on real paper), physical constraints on how large a journal issue justified competition between papers all of which passed tests of robustness, but digital publishing has no such constraints. This thinking led to the foundation of a few new journals dedicated to being open to all readers (no subscriptions required, the costs of publishing being covered by authors rather than readers), and to basing acceptance/rejection decisions on scientific robustness only, not any estimates of trendiness.

I welcomed this development, and published in several of these journals in their first issues and continue to do so. Recently, we returned to one of the earliest journals of this type, for no particular reason other than a feeling it would be nice to put something their way again. This turned out to be a big mistake.

The initial submission was smooth; we formatted the paper according to instructions, had the usual fight with an annoying web-based submission system - this happens with all journals - and got a fast response to say that our manuscript had been sent out for peer review. The peer review went smoothly too: we soon got an e-mail from an editor containing the reviewers' suggestions for improving our manuscript, and a link for submitting the corrected version. So far, so normal.

We did the corrections, and submitted. The submission bounced back with a demand that we add ethical statements for our use of our human subjects and a lot of details about our collecting specimens in the field. This was a bit of a surprise, as our paper involved no humans at all and was entirely lab-based with no element of field work or collection. Baffled, we wrote to the editor who had bounced our paper to explain, but got no reply. So we resubmitted with a covering letter explaining that we could not add the requested elements because they did not reply. It bounced

again, with the same letter from a different editor. I had a strong feeling that our submission was not being bounced by a human at all, but by some machine system that was spotting keywords and making wrong assumptions. Writing back did receive a response that our query had been sent to someone's manager, and we heard no more. I tried to use the journal website to find the contact address of the senior editor, but all that as given was the same generic whole-journal address we had already tried. It has proved impossible to find a clear address for an identifiable human being who runs the journal.

Fed up with how this once friendly and approachable journal has lost the openness about editors, and has apparently replaced careful reading with incompetent reading (whether by human or machine), we withdrew our paper and submitted it instead to *Biology Open*, a newer journal with similar ideals, run by the non-profit Company of Biologists, who plough profits back into supporting conferences and students. The journal was friendly, professional, and published the paper with no fuss.

I am really sad that the original journal has gone so far off the rails. I know publishing properly is difficult, but competence and professionalism are two things that should distinguish proper journals from the predatory ('fake') journals that plague our inboxes every morning. A journal that was once a beacon of open and inclusive publishing is risking throwing that reputation away, by its decisions to hide the contact details of its senior staff and by using editorial processes that make authors feel as if they are characters in a story by Franz Kafka.

Jamie Davies, Edinburgh, May 2022