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Subject: Reviewing for Lingua

Date:

From: Pringle, Chris (ELS-OXF) <c.pringle@elsevier.com>

Dear

Thank you for your comments to Professor Whitaker in response to his invitation to you to review for Lingua.

There certainly seems to be widespread misunderstanding of the editorial transition at Lingua. Obviously I don't know exactly what your view of it is, but the common perception seems to be:

- The editors attempted to negotiate with Elsevier to achieve fair(er) Open Access arrangements on Lingua;
- Elsevier refused to negotiate;
- The editors were therefore left with no option but to resign.

Some key facts which seem not to be common knowledge:

- One of the editors' non-negotiable demands was that Elsevier should give them ownership of the journal;
- It was the editors who refused to negotiate (our Senior Vice-President's attempt to arrange a meeting to discuss the matter with them was rebuffed);
- Elsevier was therefore left with no option but to decline to give the journal away.

Thus you can see it was entirely the editors' choice to resign, after they had deliberately provoked a dispute which they had no intention of resolving in any other way. This contrasts poorly with the actions of the editors of other Elsevier journals who have approached us more reasonably and to whom we have been able to respond more flexibly by adjusting OA arrangements.

Why would they do this? Frankly I believe the whole episode was less about Open Access than about Johan wishing to hold on to power. We were implementing Elsevier's new editorial rotation policy, and the sequence of events suggests that OA was his pretext to prevent us ending his editorship, as he had never raised it as an issue before. You will note that prior to the transition, we had appointed a co-editor alongside him in preparation for his rotation off; but that with the creation of Glossa, Johan is back in sole charge. I can entirely understand his wish to continue as editor-in-chief, and I fully sympathise with his unhappiness when the rotation policy was introduced and expectations changed, especially as he was obviously doing a good job. If he wants to continue being an editor, then by all means, start Glossa, and I wish him good luck with it – but it is unfair to try to build Glossa by destroying Lingua, and especially by pressurizing and attacking colleagues who still work with Lingua, and hindering the publications of junior researchers who still need to publish in Lingua.

But let's leave speculation about putative motivations aside, and move on from the editorial transition to the rights and wrongs Elsevier's publishing practices. Again, I don't know exactly what you object to, so I will limit myself to some very general points:

- It is much easier to get a bad reputation than to restore a good one;
- We give much better value than many people realise;
- Evolution is better than revolution;
- Our policies on OA and on sharing and hosting are much more generous than many people realise.

On reputation: our bad reputation is about 20 years out of date. It really came about because of some high price rises on Pergamon Press journals following Pergamon's acquisition by Elsevier in 1991. Since then we have responded with price rises that have been consistently lower than the industry average, while trying to give better value in a multitude of ways. These days I believe we are quite good citizens of the world. But people still think of us as exorbitantly highly-priced.

On value: it is wrong to talk about price without considering value. It is clear from the data on journal downloads and citations that in general, Elsevier journals give our customers significantly better value in those terms than many (possibly even most?) of our competitors. Certainly we give good enough value that it is unfair to single Elsevier out for criticism ahead of other publishers. Likewise for profit, which is something of a red herring. So long as we give good value, why object to our profits? Which in any case (a) are not as high as people often perceive (the oft-quoted 37% or so gross becomes some 21% or so net after tax, still healthy but not exorbitant) and (b) are simply a function of economies of scale and consequent efficiency, not excessive greed (if we were less competent, less efficient, and therefore less profitable, would that make us more virtuous?).

Evolution vs revolution: academic publishing is changing. The most zealous Open Access advocates are urging revolution, and some would like to see Elsevier and its like destroyed. I suggest that revolutions generally cause a lot of collateral damage and innocent casualties, and an OA revolution would be no different. Elsevier and other publishers have been responding positively to OA, with policies that are constantly being updated and evolving, not at the pace that the zealots would like, but perhaps at a pace that is better for many of those concerned.

On OA policies etc: let me just direct you to the Policies section of the Elsevier website, and in particular those on Open Access licenses, Hosting content, and Sharing articles:
<https://www.elsevier.com/about/our-business/policies>

I hope these comments are helpful. If there are particular points you would like to discuss further, I will be happy to do so. Meanwhile, I really hope you will reconsider your decision not to review for Lingua.

Kind regards,
Chris

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