

Reflections: On Publishing

Reclaiming value from academic labor: commentary by the Editors of *Human Geography*

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There have long been discussions about the need for an alternative publishing model for academic research. This has been made clear by the September 2017 scandal involving *Third World Quarterly*. The editor's deeply problematic decision to publish an essay arguing in favor of colonialism was likely meant as click-bait to drive clicks and citations. But we should not lose sight of the fact that this latest scandal is only one recent manifestation of a long-simmering problem that has periodically commanded significant attention in the academic literature, blogs, email lists, conference sessions, and the popular press. As a direct result, over the last decade or more, new journals have been created that specifically endeavor to offer routes around corporate/capitalist academic publishing, and several existing journals have removed themselves from this profit-driven ecosystem. In this commentary, the editorial team of the journal *Human Geography* weighs in on what we see as the nature of the problem, what we are doing in response, what our successes have been, and what challenges remain.

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significant attention in the academic literature, blogs, email lists, conference sessions, and the popular press. As a direct result, over the last decade or more, new journals have been created that specifically endeavor to offer routes around corporate/capitalist academic publishing, and several existing journals have removed themselves from this profit-driven ecosystem.

In this commentary, the editorial team of the journal *Human Geography* weighs in on what we see as the nature of the problem, what we are doing in response, what our successes have been, and what challenges remain.

It seems to us that the nature of the problem is fairly clear. First, as we know, the vast majority of research published in peer-reviewed academic journals (at least in geography and similar disciplines) is funded by universities, government agencies, non-profit organizations, non-governmental organizations, and the academics themselves (who dedicate significant uncompensated time to research, especially in summer months when many of us are 'off-contract' with our university employers). Academics once again perform significant and almost always uncompensated labor acting as editors of those journals, reviewing manuscripts for those journals, and sitting on those journals' editorial boards. Those manuscripts are then published as peer-reviewed articles in journals that profit mightily by selling the very articles back to universities, laboratories, other institutions, and individuals. Or, as Robert Darnton, now Emeritus University Librarian at Harvard University, succinctly remarked: "We faculty do the research, write the papers, referee papers by other researchers, serve on editorial boards, all of it for free ... and then we buy back the results of our labour at outrageous prices" (quoted in Sample 2012, 1).

Second, largely because of the tenure system in which individual faculty members are evaluated based largely upon citations and impact measures, there is overwhelming pressure, especially on junior faculty, to publish in 'ranked' journals, which, with few exceptions, fall within the corporate/capitalist model of academic publishing. This, for obvious reasons, becomes self-perpetuating. And thus, we have ended up with a system in which there are very few 'valued' publishing options outside of this corporate/capitalist structure of knowledge production and dissemination.

The journal *Human Geography* was created specifically in response to this. One of the primary motivations in the creation of the journal was precisely our recognition of the need to retain control of the value produced by academic labor. As we write on our website, and paraphrased here, over the last twenty years, journals that once were owned and produced by universities and academic and professional associations have come to be controlled, in part or in whole, by publishing houses that increasingly are concentrated in a few multinational media conglomerates. This means that the surplus value produced by the academic labor that writes the content of journals ends up as profit for media capital. It also means that corporations control the fund of knowledge produced by academic labor.

We are determined to resist this trend. Hence in 2007 we founded a non-profit corporation—the Institute for *Human Geography*, Inc.—and in 2008 we published the first issue of the journal *Human Geography*. In the years since, neither the institute nor the journal has established relations of any kind with commercial publishing houses. Even so, *Human Geography* is not an open access, web-based journal. Individual subscriptions are offered at a low cost (\$40 per year print and online access, \$20 per year online only), and institutional subscriptions at a moderate cost (\$600/\$540). These subscription fees cover the material costs of producing the journal—editors work on a purely volunteer basis—and all surplus is put toward sponsoring radical research (more on that below).

To date we have achieved significant successes. First, one only needs to quickly glance through the journal's table of contents to see articles by some of the discipline's most influential thinkers intermingled with contributions from younger, lesser known scholars. This is a direct result of the international reputation of the journal's editorial board on the one hand, and the journal's explicitly stated mission to create a space for young scholars to publish critical, radical, political, and politicized scholarship on topics under-represented in mainstream/corporate/capitalist academic journals on the other. Second, the journal has also undertaken a significant effort to organize book review symposia on important new texts within geography and beyond. As with the traditional articles published in the journal, contributions to these book review symposia come from well-known and junior scholars alike. Third, and perhaps most directly related to the journal's founding goal to wrest the accumulated surplus value of our academic labor out of the hands of the corporate/capitalist

publishing industry, in October 2015 we announced our small grants program, offering grants of up to \$5,000 each to sponsor radical research, activism, and writing. It is incredibly satisfying to report that to date we have funded over 25 different projects, disbursing a grand total of nearly \$120,000.

That said, there are significant challenges that come with our uncompromising stand to be entirely free and independent of the corporate/capitalist publishing industry. As Peet (2008) remarks, journals that are not indexed on indices such as the ISI Web of Knowledge (which are generally corporate controlled) "might just as well not exist. Writers that this corporation does not follow, write in thin air. Our work is not known if they choose not to notice us. We are judged, ranked and ordered via criteria decided upon by a media corporation" (Peet 2008, 1).

Human Geography is not ranked in these indices, nor are the articles we publish included in Google Scholar search results. And nonetheless, we exist. The journal's website received nearly 70,000 unique visitors in the last 12 months (September 2016 – August 2017), and the PDF files of our most viewed articles were downloaded over 500 times each in the past 12 months. To get to this point we have depended heavily on the reputation of the journal, its editor, and its editorial board, and on the high quality of articles, reviews, symposia, and opinions we publish, both for continuing to attract high quality submissions, and also (and equally importantly) for authors who need their publications in *Human Geography* to be valorized on their CVs, job applications, and tenure packets.

As an editorial team, we will continue to work tirelessly to increase the quality of the journal, and we sincerely hope that critical and radical geographers from all over the world and in all areas of the discipline will continue to send us the fruits of their academic labor, and will continue to respect the scholarship of their colleagues who publish in *Human Geography* and other alternative, non-capitalist outlets, even if, especially if, our neoliberal system of tenure, promotion, and self-valorization says we should not.

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