The Junkification of Research

ABSTRACT

This essay considers the emergent phenomenon of 'junkification' in academic research publishing. The term junkification was originally coined to describe the increasing volume of low-quality content and products permeating digital platforms. Extending junkification to online academic publishing, we draw on literature that frames academic research as an increasingly commodified good. We theorise that this commodification has enabled the same mechanisms that underpin the shift to junkification in digital marketplaces (and their subsequent degradation) to permeate online academic publishing. We argue that this trend represents a further perversion of the long-standing and pervasive 'publish or perish' culture in academia. As commercial publishing interests converge with new technologies, a system emerges where scholars increasingly bear the costs of low-esteem publishing that limits genuine scholarly contributions. We analyse the structural and cultural shifts within academic publishing that facilitate and perpetuate the junkification of research, and call for a re-evaluation of the underlying values and practices sustaining scholarly communication to counteract this trend.

Keywords: Junkification of Research, Academic Publishing, Commodification of Knowledge, Open Access, Publish or Perish, Platform Capitalism, Pay-to-Publish, Predatory Journals, Impact Factor, Metrics

INTRODUCTION

'Junkification' has emerged as a new concept to refer to a troubling trend in the digital landscape: the influx of low-quality content and products into online platforms that are diluting the quality and authenticity that once characterised these spaces. The term gained traction in 2023 and 2024 through viral posts and videos of Internet users lamenting the deterioration in their online experiences (Vermeer, 2023). It was soon picked up by influential

media outlets such as *Prospect Magazine* (Zuckerman, 2023), *Bloomberg* (Lee, 2023) and *The Atlantic* (Lubin 2024) that amplified concerns about the Internet's descent into mediocrity. Examples of junkification include the rapid expansion of third-party sellers on *Amazon* (flooding the platform with an array of products that all appear to be similar, if not the same, and are often of questionable origins), the substantial increase of mass-produced items on *Etsy* (imitating the custom-made and handcrafted goods that were originally the main focus of the marketplace), and the obfuscation of search results on *Google* beneath layers of sponsored content (requiring the user to scroll past layers of advertisements before arriving at genuine search results). Analogous to the introduction of 'junk food' that led to a junkification of diets (Albritton, 2012), digital junkification refers to the inundation of digital spaces with low-quality content and commoditised goods (Lubin, 2024) that may lead to fast gratification but ultimately fail to satisfy (Brooks, 2024).

This essay examines junkification in online academic publishing. We propose that forces of commodification and pursuit of scale – analogous to those that transformed reputable online marketplaces and search engines into repositories of the mediocre and misleading – are similarly eroding online scholarly publication and communication. A central paradox in the academic landscape is the rising volume of low-quality publications despite the profession's ongoing and established fixation on publishing in elite journals (Cluely, 2014; Kapoor, 2024). However, low acceptance rates and exhaustive review processes mean that few academics can realistically meet the dual pressure to publish both frequently *and* in elite outlets – a burden that is too often disproportionately borne by scholars marginalised within academic hierarchies, including many in parts of the Global South (see Guzmán-Valenzuela & Gómez, 2019) as well as those facing barriers related to language, institutional support, employment precarity or other factors. This has led to a tiered publishing system: at the top, an elite, slow-moving Tier 1 market with high barriers to entry, long review times and limited capacity,

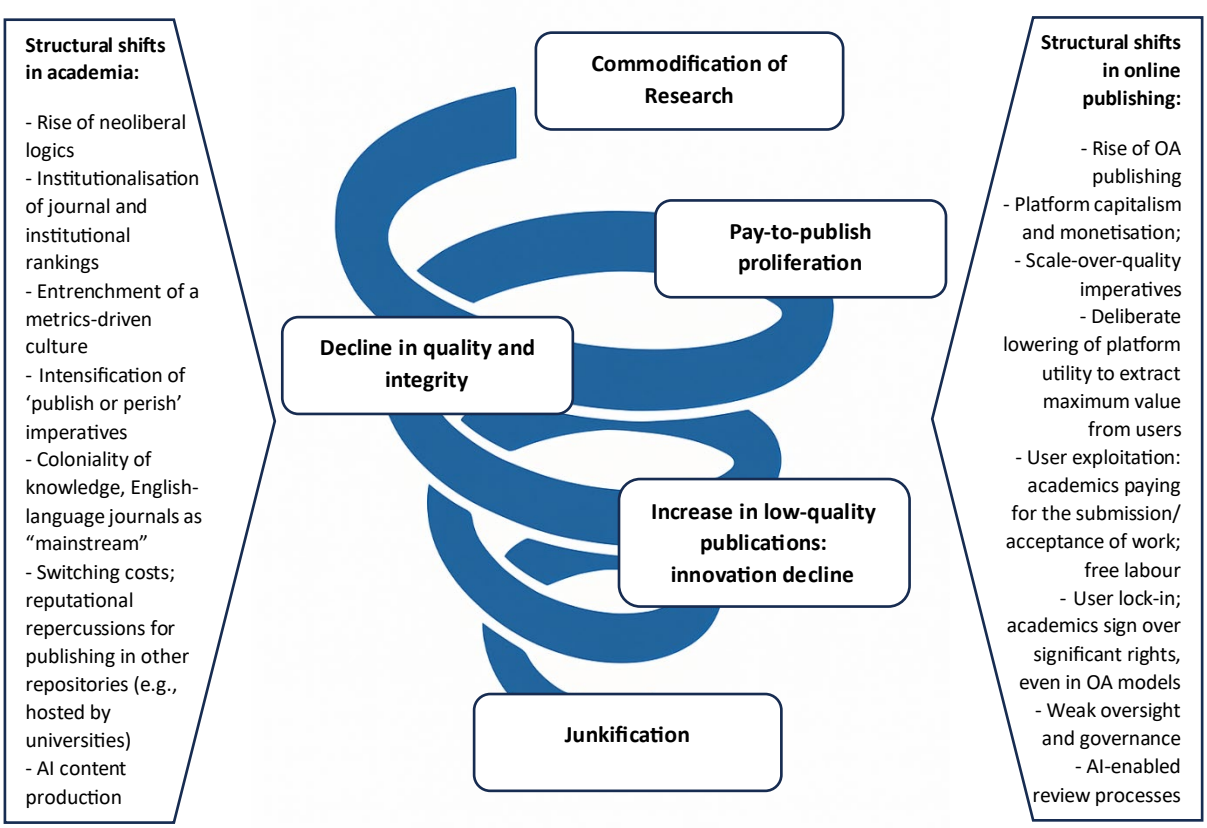
followed by a second tier of reputable journals that are increasingly difficult to access due to rising submission volumes; alongside these, a more permissive, often pay-to-publish market that promises rapid turnaround and greater accessibility (Hanson et al., 2023). The latter has increasingly taken the form of commercialised open access (OA) venues and predatory journals, both of which have become key channels through which junkification advances. The resulting surge in publications has inundated the online research landscape with a deluge of papers, the quality and integrity of which are difficult to assess without any personal judgement and special expertise (Tenopir et al., 2016).

Our essay explores the political economy of academic publishing (Lincoln, 2012; Puehringer et al., 2021) in terms of how the commodification of academic research has opened avenues for the same mechanisms that underpin the deterioration of digital marketplaces to infiltrate online academic publishing. Digital and OA models, initially showing great promise for democratising access to research findings through nearly universal digital access, have in many cases been co-opted by for-profit publishers for commercial publishing gain, with scale and profit prioritised over scholarly quality. Junkification is, however, not just driven by the commodification of research or the rise of OA publishing alone, but by a set of overlapping and important trends (Figure 1): Structural shifts within academia intensify pressures to produce and publish (Tekeste, 2025), especially in English-language outlets that dominate the global research and evaluation landscape, while structural shifts in online publishing enable the escalation in output. Individual trends such as the intensification of 'publish or perish' imperatives thereby operate both as structural shifts within academia and as mechanisms that drive junkification; for clarity, we locate these trends under the structural domains in Figure 1. Together, they reinforce one another and create a downward spiral into junkification.

We further argue that commercial publishing interests, together with the pervasive 'publish or perish' culture in academia, mean that the scholar-author, as commodity supplier, is not just

offering free labour (writing articles and performing peer review) but is increasingly pushed into paying for the submission and acceptance of work. This marks a deeper shift in how online platforms extract value from users. We contend that the intensification of the commodification of academic labour (driven by neoliberal logics as well as metrics of productivity and visibility) synergises with profitability imperatives. Together, these forces create an environment where the production of outputs increasingly overshadows the quest for genuine scholarly innovation or contribution. This essay unpacks the successive stages of the downward spiral, probes the structural and cultural shifts within academia and online publishing that facilitate and perpetuate the junkification of research, and calls for a critical reassessment of the values and practices that underlie scholarly communication in the digital age.

Figure 1: The downward spiral of junkification



WHAT IS JUNKIFICATION?

In January 2023, *New York Magazine* published an article on 'The Junkification of Amazon' (Herrman, 2023), which investigated the massive encroachment of third-party sellers on the platform. The article highlighted Amazon appeared to have indiscriminately allowed many new sellers to operate through its platform with little regard to quality or reputation. This shift coincided with the distribution of more low-quality products, and deteriorating customer satisfaction ratings. Alarmingly, the article suggested that the junkification of Amazon might be a deliberate strategy. The expansion of online shopping generated record profits for companies like Amazon (Weise, 2021) that a few short years later had all but reversed, leading to the company initiating significant cost-cutting and employee lay-offs (Herman, 2023). In this situation, junkification can be seen as a deliberate strategy to expand market share by moving into the lower end of the market with Amazon effectively becoming a primary vehicle for all consumer businesses to acquire customers.

Given Amazon's market dominance – holding almost 50% share of the US e-commerce market (Shvartsman, 2024) – it unsurprising the company has been singled out for its role in junkification. Amazon is not alone, however, with platforms such as *Etsy* (Tiffany, 2023), *Reddit* (Wright, 2024) *TikTok*, *YouTube* and *X* (Nyce, 2024) having been similarly called to account publicly. Doctorow (2023) uses the stronger term 'enshittification' to describe the phenomena of junkification. He argues that the genesis of the degradation of online platforms lies in their shift from spaces that were once beneficial to their users to enterprises exploiting users for their gain. These platforms offer a service that connects buyers and sellers, and take a cut of the value of their economic exchange. As the number of sellers increases, so does competition between them, with platforms able to generate revenue from giving preferential search result placements to those who pay the most. Customers are manipulated and

exploited as a result and experience a generalised decline in quality and reliability to a minimum acceptable level.

'Enshittification' was named *Word of the Year for 2023* by the American Dialect Society as "a sadly apt term for how our online lives have become gradually degraded" (Roberts, 2024: 1). Doctorow explores this degradation in relation to the evolution of Facebook's evolution, using it to exemplify the process and stages of enshittification. The Facebook platform moved from offering a value surplus (networking benefits) to its initial users, to exploiting user data for advertiser and publisher gain (exemplified by controversies such as the Cambridge Analytica scandal), to ultimately prioritising profits at the expense of the platform's utility and integrity. This enshittification, for Doctorow, was compounded by the diminishing landscape of competition and regulatory oversight together with limited opportunities for individuals to engage with and modify technological solutions independently (Doctorow, 2024).

Despite the deterioration of the platforms – which results from "the power of platform owners to change how their platforms extract value from users" (Naughton, 2023: n.p.) – users continue to endure the enshittified experience due to the presence of high switching costs. Switching costs, in this instance, comprise "everything you have to give up when you leave a product or service" (Doctorow, 2024: n.p.), such as your *Facebook* friends, *Twitter/X* circle, or eBooks and audiobooks that are locked into platforms via digital rights management. In sum, this means that a consumers' reliance on any platform – whether it be for inter alia, news, dating or shopping – can become so hard to extract from, that the platform can exploit those consumers by peddling worse products and services to them.

FACTORS UNDERPINNING THE DOWNWARD SPIRAL OF JUNKIFICATION

Analyses of junkification and enshittification have extended beyond online platforms to account for changes as far-reaching as the teaching profession (Diamond and Bulfin, 2024) and the fabrication of data for research (Timpka, 2003). To date, however, junkification has not been considered when it comes to changes in the processes and outlets for scholarly publication. This is remiss given these changes bear important resemblances to the growth of platform capitalism. The scale of academic production has risen enormously in recent years. For example, the number of papers catalogued in the Web of Sciences and Scopus databases has grown from 1.92 million in 2016 to 2.82 million by 2022 (Hanson et al., 2023; Wilcox, 2023). Global sales across the industry surpass USD19 billion, placing it between the music and film industries in terms of economic scale (Buranyi, 2022). Some publishers report profit margins that rival those of Microsoft or Google (Hagve, 2020).

As part of this rapid expansion, signs of junkification are evident, especially in the ascendancy of large commercial OA models and the growth of predatory journals that prioritise financial gain over scholarly integrity. These outlets publish large volumes of research, often under the guise of ‘special issues’ and of dubious quality. Given these developments, it is worth examining whether the mechanisms propelling the junkification of online platforms is similarly affecting online academic publishing. We thus ask: Is academic publication following the process of junkification? Central to our inquiry is an examination of the transformation of academic knowledge and labour into marketable goods or services, which forms the basis of their commodification. This is a process that has been amplified by the shift towards digitisation. We examine the extent to which academic publishing has mirrored online platforms in its trajectory towards junkification, thereby shedding light on the broader implications for knowledge dissemination and scholarly integrity.

Commodification of Research

The commodification of research and knowledge has been well noted for some decades. In his seminal analysis of how post-industrialism had changed the nature of knowledge, Lyotard (1984) convincingly argued that knowledge had become increasingly external to the knowers, captured instead in then-new forms of information and communication technologies.

> *The relationship of the suppliers and users of knowledge to the knowledge they supply and use is now tending, and will increasingly tend, to assume the form already taken by the relationship of commodity producers and consumers to the commodities they produce and consume […] Knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold. (p.4)*

Lyotard's insight was that knowledge was no longer of value intrinsically, but had become subsumed as an item of capitalist economic exchange; a commodity whose value was determined by the answer to the question: "Can it be sold?" This analysis anticipated the rise of neoliberalism in the decades that followed, and the widespread changes in academic research, removing it from the control of public institutions (e.g., universities and scholarly associations) to private hands (corporations and independent publishing houses). From the 1980s onward we saw that research became progressively commodified, as economic criteria, profitability in particular, increasingly became the dominant factor in determining decisions about research in universities (Radder, 2010). These changes have led to an era where, as Mirowski and Sent (2002) observed, science is 'bought and sold', shaped by market-based university management practices, funding of research by private corporations, and the extensive use of performance metrics to assess research quality. Within this "academic capitalism knowledge regime" value is assigned to "knowledge privatization and profit taking in which institutions, inventor faculty, and corporations have claims that come before those of the public" (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004: 29)

The commodification of research comes in many forms, including profit-seeking by universities, the commercial contracting of research, government commissioning of research, and the exploitation of patents (Radder, 2010). Perhaps the most egregious example comes in the form of commercial academic publishing where the value of research is increasingly measured by its capacity to generate value for publishers rather than for its use value, with the scholarly journal publishing having come under special scrutiny for rapacious profiteering from the production of research knowledge (Harvie et al., 2013). The commodification of research publications has been exacerbated by the establishment and broad deployment of academic ranking lists for university administrators to quantify research quality, which gave rise to a Tier 1 market, followed by a second tier of reputable journals that also became increasingly difficult to access due to rising submission volumes. As demand for journal space continued to outstrip availability, this eventually opened the doors for a pay-to-publish market to accommodate the demand for journal space. Notable examples of ranking lists in business disciplines include the 'FT40' (later FT45, then FT50) list of journals used to calculate the Financial Times business school rankings since 2007, the Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC) Journal Quality List first published in 2008, and the ABS Journal Quality Guide published by the UK Chartered Association of Business Schools in 2010.

Willmott (2011) critiques the commodification of research through the rise of academic journal ranking lists and the related practice of 'metricising' research quality to subject it to managerial scrutiny and incentive schemes. He argues that lists are "comparable to money that functions as a universal equivalent for the value of diverse commodities" (p. 431). The result is a homogenisation of research as highly ranked and highly cited journals privilege "widely researched topics in which commonly used methodologies are deployed and well-established traditions and perspectives are engaged" (p. 431). Rankings become fetishised, elevating certain types of scholarship over others and transforming academic work into

tradeable commodities based on journal prestige. These concerns echo broader concerns of the effect of scientometric indicators on the commoditisation of research as enabled by advanced means through which research can now be quantified (Radder, 2010). Commodification has given rise to what has been dubbed 'the quantified scholar' whose work is assessed by scores, metrics and numerical evaluation, used by governments and universities as proxies for the value of academic work (Pardo-Guerro, 2022). The 'audit culture' that has arisen from the availability of such metrics has been a central driver of commoditisation (Lincoln, 2012)

Fernández-Ríos and Rodríguez-Díaz (2014) argue that research publication is a market where "building knowledge with an impact factor is an academic commodity. The value of information and scientific knowledge can be bought and sold. Using the impact factor as a commodity amounts to commoditizing knowledge" (p. 156). The pressure on academics is not to produce work that advances theory and practice through scholarly activity, but to meet the dual demand of publishing frequently *and* in Tier 1 journals (usually equated with high impact factors) – a demand few can realistically achieve. Moreover, this set of perverse incentives tends to lead to a diminution of the scholarly value of research through practices such as authors being listed on papers to which they have not contributed, partial publication of the same data in multiple papers to accelerate output, and a bias towards producing papers with positive conclusions. Ultimately, even within Tier 1 publishing, the quality and originality of research have started to matter less than the place where it is published, such that "a paper's acceptance into a high-ranking journal effectively valuates it as a commodity, regardless of the actual quality of the research" (Bales, Sare, Coker and vanDuinkerken, 2011: 144). As Casadevall and Fang (2014:1) warn, this 'impact factor mania' has a pernicious effect on research, most worryingly by reducing the overall value and reliability of scholarly research.

In what has been called the global 'political economy of publishing' (Lincoln, 2012), ranking systems have narrowed "the range of potential insights into social conditions and silencing a panoply of voices who might usefully contribute to the discourse around social change and social justice" (p. 1452). The effects of this, problematic as they are, are not felt the same by all. An analysis of publications in leading American medical journals between 1990 and 2020 revealed that Black and Hispanic researchers, as well as women, were significantly unrepresented as lead authors (Abdalla et al., 2022). In the field of law, a study of 4,500 articles published in top fifty U.S. law reviews from 2014-2018 showed both significant 'letterhead bias' (i.e. bias in favour of institutional affiliation) and underrepresentation of authors from outside the United States (Thompson, 2019). However, even OA publishing can exacerbate the problem. As Mwele Malecela, Director, Neglected Tropical Diseases at the World Health Organization commented when the prestigious journal *Nature* proudly announced its OA policy (at a cost to authors of €9,500 per article): "The fees are outrageous, an impediment to open access, and a huge hurdle for LMIC [Low- and Middle-Income Countries] researchers". Benjamin Tsofa, from the KEMRI-Wellcome Trust Research Programme in Kenya, added "This is the net annual earning of some of our scientists in many African institutions" (cited in Pai, 2020 n.p.). In this political economy, it would appear that only white men in elite Western universities can produce the most valuable commodities.

The transformation of academic work into commodified output has precipitated a paradigmatic shift in academic publishing, increasingly positioning researchers as content producers (Radder, 2010). Within the prevailing 'publish or perish' paradigm that defines contemporary academic culture, researchers face relentless pressure to produce a continuous stream of publications and content whose value is determined by journal lists and journal impact-factors, at least for those able to compete in this space. For those not in such a position, pay-to-publish and unranked OA journals often remain the only viable option to

participate in the system of academic publication. The drive for quantity is deeply rooted in academic evaluation metrics that valorise publication frequency over the substantive contribution of the research itself. At its worst the result is that academics are doomed to "to publish incessantly irrelevant and pointless documents" for the sake of job security and career advancement (Fernandez-Cano, 2021: 3673).

Pay-to-publish proliferation

Ironically, the arrival of dedicated OA journals in the early 2000s led by publishers such as the Public Library of Science (PLoS) and BioMed Central was meant to offer a solution to the politics of 'publish or perish' (Wood, 2005). These new journals, funded by philanthropic and foundation support, were published entirely online. They were set up to "challenge academia's obsession with journal status and impact factors" (Giles, 2007: 9) while attempting to overcome limited journal space and subscription-based publishing. By providing additional (and unlimited) digital publication spaces (Stahel & VanderHeiden, 2017), these new formats were meant to help scholars with disseminating their work by enhancing the visibility of research, removing paywalls and improving download and citation rates. Several studies measuring the advantages of OA publishing largely confirmed an overall so-called "open access citation advantage" (Langham-Putrow et al., 2021).

US and British government agencies (e.g., the U.S. National Institutes of Health) supported public accessibility of research, particularly access to clinical trial information. These efforts were not without controversy due to legal and ethical issues, for instance, whether studies should be published irrespective of their funder and results, and whether sensitive data would inadvertently be made public (Wood, 2005). Despite these concerns, several major funding bodies started to advocate OA publication mandates (e.g., as part of the so-called 'Plan S initiative backed by cOAlition S, a global consortium of research funding and agencies) to democratise access to research and ensure the wide dissemination of findings (Hagve, 2020).

Plan S required that all scientific works resulting from research financed by public grants be published in OA journals or OA platforms from 2021 onwards.

The OA movement soon prompted commercial publishers to explore OA models, and resulted in requirements for authors (or their institutions/funders) to pay often considerable 'article processing charges' (APCs)[1]. Effectively, APCs constituted a new and lucrative revenue stream for commercial publishers to use online publishing to extract value from users (Hagve, 2020). The pressure to publish, tied to requirements for copyright transfer or exclusive licences (even in OA models that claim to enable broader reuse of published works), compels authors to remain within publisher-controlled systems. Concurrently, publishers diversified revenue streams through 'author services' such as editing and proofreading. The shift to an APC-driven business model extended beyond commercial OA publishers such as MDPI. Traditional publishers such as Elsevier, Springer-Nature, and Wiley embraced OA models, substantially increasing publication volumes, often through an expansion of issues and new titles (Hanson et al., 2023). This expansion may have been an attempt to (re-)capture market share, or to scale up quickly due to increasing competition. A notable example is Springer Nature's initiative in January 2021 to create an OA model for its premier journal *Nature* and 32 other titles by imposing author fees of approximately €9,500 per paper, as mentioned earlier (Else, 2020). Such high fees have been subject to considerable criticism, given that they may paradoxically hinder the free sharing of knowledge and exacerbate inequities in authorship (Pai, 2020).

Decline in quality and integrity

The commodification of academic research coupled with the rapid developments in OA publishing has led to concerns about potential erosion of the quality and integrity of research

[1] APCs are fees imposed on authors to have their articles made available online in lieu of subscription fees that readers and libraries would normally have to pay to gain access to the article.

papers, most notably in some segments of the OA market. Large-scale OA models were frequently found to be vulnerable to lapses in quality control due to weak oversight and governance (Butler, 2013; Newton and Sreenivasan, 2021). In 2023, the Web of Science delisted about 50 journals, including nearly two dozen from prominent OA publishers Hindawi (acquired by Wiley in 2021) and MDPI. This move affected some of the highest volume journals and removed their impact factor (Brainard, 2023). The scale of the delisting drew attention to systemic issues in high-volume OA business models, particularly around the rapid special issue growth that may compromise peer-review standards and the scientific soundness and novelty of contributions.

High APCs may be justified by the employment of staff to maintain high publishing standards (e.g., as in the case of the *Nature* journals) and counteract junkification. However, Van Vlokhoven's (2019) analysis posits that the shift towards universal APC-based OA models could prompt even high-quality journals to adopt more lenient acceptance policies. Van Vlokhoven forewarns of a further decline in quality standards should the scholarly community cease to evaluate authors based on the prestige metrics of the journals in which their work appears. Such a shift could undermine journals' role as curators of superior scholarly output and instead burden readers with the onerous task of assessing the quality of articles themselves. The adoption of universal APC-based OA models thus risks creating a congested scholarly environment where the recognition of excellence becomes markedly challenged and junkification inevitable, a development which starkly contradicts the foundational goals of OA

Increase in low-quality publications

Distinguishing reputable journals from predatory or illegitimate ones has become increasingly difficult, even for seasoned researchers (Ojala et al., 2020). The sheer volume of academic publications alone makes it challenging to identify the most authoritative work on a

given topic. The proliferation of pseudo-scholarly, hijacked and fraudulent journals has led to issues such as pirated articles, hoax papers and misinformation that undermine public trust in scientific research. Some rapidly expanding journals, fuelled by a surge of special issues, attract both esteemed scholars and low-quality contributions, thereby further blurring the lines of credibility (Oviedo-García, 2021). For the public, navigating this vast volume of publications is overwhelming, and can lead to a preference on accessing OA content ranking high in search rankings (e.g., on Google), especially when credible content is locked behind paywalls. This behaviour underscores a critical issue: the difficulty in identifying credible sources amidst a vast sea of information.

Despite the surge in published research, breakthrough innovations are declining – possibly due to reliance on narrower knowledge bases (Park et al., 2023). Rather than fostering progress, a glut of information may hinder intellectual and societal advancement. The increased prevalence of AI tools such as ChatGPT further complicates academic publishing. While AI offers automation benefits, it risks lowering content quality and diluting information integrity (Islam & Greenwood, 2024). Many journals now require AI use disclosure amid concerns over fabricated research. Nonetheless, numerous studies show clear signs of AI-generated content (often due to "tell-tale" words and phrases left in papers), which raises doubts about proper scrutiny by authors, reviewers and editors. At the same time, AI is now increasingly being used in the peer review process, with AI 'feedback agents' taking part in the process (Naddaf, 2025).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION: SOLUTIONS TO JUNKIFICATION?

Our review has shown that academic research is increasingly subjected to processes of junkification and enshittification in an analogous manner to what has been observed in online platforms. The commodification of research has been created by an increasingly competitive academic landscape that has simultaneously prized journal ranking lists and journal impact-

factors as the measure of research quality over and above the intrinsic value of the research itself. The rise of OA publication together with digitalisation has expanded this commoditisation and increased revenue opportunities for publishing firms through the introduction of APCs. The commodity research business has become a lucrative enterprise but has, in turn, led to growing concerns about both the value and quality of published research; what we call here junkification. Commercial publishing interests often prioritise high-volume publishing, resulting in a fall in quality such that more articles can be published. Simultaneously, academics – who provide the 'content' to journals free of charge – are unwittingly enrolled in the process of junkification as they are under pressure to maximise publication output, at best to gain promotion, and at worst to fend off job loss. It is a fine mess we have got ourselves into.

Commercial publishers have capitalised on this junkification of academic research: content production is almost entirely financed by university and external (e.g., governmental) payments that are covering both salaries and (often very significant) research and publication expenses (Hagve, 2020). Despite the 'prestige' associated with academic publishing, editors typically receive minimal compensation, and the critical functions of quality control and fact-checking are relegated to unpaid peer review – based on voluntary commitments to maintain scholarly standards (Copiello, 2018; Von Noorden, 2013). The digital revolution has prompted a shift towards an online production process, which has rendered physical printing (and its associated costs) and concerns about page limits virtually obsolete. Concurrently, the limited availability of publication spots in high-ranked journals has significantly exacerbated publication pressures, putting substantial pressures on scholars to seek other outlets for their work and paving the way for a pay-to-publish market. This demonstrates how junkification is fuelled directly by longer-term changes that have seen academic publishing moved from being managed by academic presses and learned societies to for-profit corporations.

Companies like Springer Nature, Elsevier, Wiley-Blackwell and Taylor & Francis have become market leaders and reliable sources of profitable investment (Fyfe, Coate, Curry, Lawson, Moxham & Røstvik, 2017). Junkification is a deliberate and exploitative business practice that trades research quality for corporate revenues.

It is important to note that the proliferation of publication outputs and outlets does not uniformly result in a decline in scholarly quality. Many journals (including those outside ranking systems) continue to conduct rigorous peer review and provide valuable venues for knowledge exchange, including in underrepresented fields and regions. Our use of the term junkification does not refer to publishing in "lower-prestige" or unranked journals, but to a systemic erosion of quality controls, integrity and innovation in those parts of online academic publishing where commercial incentives are directly tied to volume. Junkification denotes a structural condition rather than a judgement of individual journals or authors and creates a publishing environment that prioritises throughput over scholarly contribution.

We also recognise that the dynamics of junkification are not uniform across the global academic landscape. While our analysis has largely drawn on examples from English-speaking contexts, where the dominance of journal rankings and impact factors has entrenched a metricised publishing culture, the situation differs elsewhere. In parts of the Global South, scholars often confront the dual burden of needing to publish in English-language outlets to gain international recognition, while simultaneously navigating national evaluation systems that may privilege other activities such as outreach or large-scale grant acquisition (Guzmán-Valenzuela & Gómez, 2019). Moreover, the dominance of English reflects what has been called 'linguistic imperialism', 'linguistic colonialism' (Phillipson, 1992) and 'linguistic inequality' (Maryns and Blommaert, 2002) whereby the privileging of the English language in academic publishing serves to privilege native English speakers as well as elites in countries where English is not the first language. This colonial legacy means

that the importance of journal publishing in the constitution of prestige has, in fact, shifted unevenly from the 'West' to the 'rest', creating highly asymmetrical pressures on scholars and institutions, as well as serving to reproduce entrenched structures of epistemic injustice.

Further research is needed to examine the extent and implications of junkification across countries and regions. There is already strong evidence that fake, sham or otherwise questionable publications are posing a significant global issue in academic publishing, but studies are still scattered and lack integration. We do know some facts: Klyce and Feller (2017) reported that as many as 25% of OA journals could be fake and only exist for the purpose of making money through APCs. These journals are typically characterised by cursory or absent peer review, high acceptance rates and fast article turnaround times, often only days. Shen and Björk (2015) found that over 400,000 predatory OA articles were already published in 2014 alone, long before OA models became more widespread. Some regional evidence also exists: Jager et al. (2017), who conducted a study amongst South African academics in economics and management, discovered that researchers frequently published in predatory journals, likely due to mistaken perceptions of legitimacy of these journals. However, the problem is certainly not limited to specific regions or disciplines. Mohammed et al. (2022) identified 258 predatory oncology journals, which collectively published over 33,000 papers that received over 335,000 citations (largely from legitimate journals). And the real issue is not predatory journals alone. It is how the aggressive expansion of publication volume under the guise of standard peer review drives the systemic erosion of quality we call junkification.

Why then do scholars and their institutions continue to support commercial publishing models that largely benefit from content generated through third-party funding and the free labour by authors, reviewers and editors? The answer lies in established norms and expectations that are deeply embedded in academia. There is an entrenched perception of the

quality of peer reviewed articles over other types of academic outputs. Journal publications are not only seen as benchmarks for quality due to peer review but also as arenas for scholarly recognition: they allow authors to be published alongside their peers, which lends credibility. This dynamic creates a major barrier to change because the act of shifting towards alternative publishing platforms (e.g., repositories hosted on university websites) would mean not just a departure from institutionalised norms but convincing one's peers of the credibility and equivalency of other outlets, which creates substantial switching costs (e.g., in the form of reputational repercussions). Publishers are undoubtedly aware that these costs present a substantial deterrent and can be leveraged. This, in turn, perpetuates the status quo rather than allowing a shift towards more equitable publishing models.

The contribution of this essay has been to identify how a process of junkification has becomes an endemic feature of academic publishing. Just as junkification has been argued to be a direct consequence of how online platforms generate value from content and products, we have argued that a similar process is happening in academic publishing. The commoditisation of research and the ease of value measurement through journal rankings and impact factors have led to a situation where long standing publish or perish academic cultures have become metricised. This has resulted in a state where academic 'quality' is no longer measured by the inherent features of the research but by the location of publication. Commoditisation lends itself to exploitation, exacerbated by the commercial management of contemporary publications, the expansion of publication volume and the commercial opportunities enabled by OA publication models.

Addressing junkification requires not only critique but also the articulation of viable alternatives. There is an urgent need to reassess academic evaluation metrics, limits on publishing for the sake of publishing, the reliance of academics on commercial publication firms as well as global equity in research. If academic research is to manifest in meaningful

and inclusive contributions leading to real societal impact, then junkification is a serious barrier. Promising avenues include cooperative publishing models that return ownership and governance to scholarly communities, as well as the expansion of institutional repositories that enable open dissemination without reliance on commercial publishers. At the policy level, emerging frameworks such as the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA) highlight the potential for systemic reform by rebalancing evaluation away from journal-based metrics and toward broader assessments of scholarly quality and impact. Together, these initiatives suggest that the current trajectory is not inevitable: there are pathways for reclaiming publishing as a public good rather than a commercial commodity. Central to this will be a return to not-for-profit models of publication through academic societies and university presses, and the development of new sustainable OA models that prioritise quality research dissemination over the sheer volume of publications. Future research should examine how such initiatives can be coordinated and embedded across disciplines. It is our hope that we can begin to counter the downward spiral of junkification and reorient scholarly publishing toward integrity, innovation and the collective and inclusive advancement of knowledge.

REFERENCES

Abdalla Moustafa, Abdalla Mohamed, Abdalla Salwa, Saad Mohamed, Jones David S., Podolsky Scott H. (2023) 'The Under-Representation and Stagnation of Female, Black, and Hispanic Authorship in the Journal of the American Medical Association and the New England Journal of Medicine', *Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities* 10(2): 920-929.

Albritton Robert (2012) 'Between Obesity and Hunger: The Capitalist Food Industry', in *Food and Culture*, pp. 356-366. London: Routledge.

Bales Stephen, Sare Laura, Coker Catherine, vanDuinkerken Wyoma (2011) 'Journal-Ranking Lists and the Academic Librarian', *Library Review* 60(2): 142-154.

Björk Bo-Christer, Solomon David (2012) 'Open Access Versus Subscription Journals: A Comparison of Scientific Impact', *BMC Medicine* 10: 1-10.

Brainard Jeffrey (2023) 'Fast-Growing Open-Access Journals Stripped of Coveted Impact Factors'. Retrieved from https://www.science.org/content/article/fast-growing-open-access-journals-stripped-coveted-impact-factors (accessed: 30 January 2025).

Brooks David. (2024) 'The Junkification of American Life', *The New York Times*, 9 May. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/05/opinion/entertainment-junk-psychology.html (accessed: 21 August 2025).

Buranyi Stephen (2022) 'Is the Staggeringly Profitable Business of Scientific Publishing Bad for Science?' Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/science/2017/jun/27/profitable-business-scientific-publishing-bad-for-science (accessed: 30 January 2025).

Butler Declan (2013) 'The Dark Side of Publishing', *Nature* 495(7442): 433.

Casadevall Arturo, Fang Ferric C. (2014) 'Causes for the Persistence of Impact Factor Mania', *MBio* 5(2): 1-5.

Cluley Robert. (2014) 'Sexual Fetishism in Organizations: The Case of Journal List Fetishism', *Organization* 21(3): 314-328.

Copiello Sergio (2018) 'On the Money Value of Peer Review', *Scientometrics* 115(1): 613-620.

Diamond Fleur, Bulfin Scott (2024) 'Sustaining English Teaching: Voices of Crisis, Challenge, Imagination and Resistance', *Idiom* 60(1): 5-8.

Doctorow Cory (2023) 'The "Enshittification" of TikTok'. Retrieved from https://www.wired.com/story/tiktok-platforms-cory-doctorow/ (accessed: 22 April 2024).

Doctorow Cory (2024) '"Enshittification" Is Coming for Absolutely Everything'. Retrieved from https://www.ft.com/content/6fb1602d-a08b-4a8c-bac0-047b7d64aba5 (accessed: 22 April 2024).

Else Holly (2020) 'Nature Journals Reveal Terms of Open-Access Option', *Nature* 588(7836): 19-20.

Fernández-Cano Antonio (2021) 'Publish, Publish… Cursed!', *Scientometrics* 126(4): 3673-3682.

Fernández-Ríos Luis, & Rodríguez-Díaz Javier (2014) 'The "Impact Factor Style of Thinking": A New Theoretical Framework', *International Journal of Clinical and Health Psychology* 14(2): 154-160.

Fyfe Aileen, Coate Kelly, Curry Stephen, Lawson Stuart, Moxham Noah, Røstvik Camilla M. (2017) *Untangling Academic Publishing: A History of the Relationship Between Commercial Interests, Academic Prestige and the Circulation of Research*. Discussion Paper, University of St Andrews.

Giles Jim (2007) ‘Open-Access Journal Will Publish First, Judge Later’, *Nature* 445(7123): 9-10.

Guzmán-Valenzuela Carolina, Gómez Carolina (2019) ‘Advancing a Knowledge Ecology: Changing Patterns of Higher Education Studies in Latin America’, *Higher Education* 77(1): 115-133.

Hagve Martin (2020) ‘The Money Behind Academic Publishing’. Retrieved from https://tidsskriftet.no/en/2020/08/kronikk/money-behind-academic-publishing (accessed: 3 April 2024).

Hanson Mark A., Barreiro Pablo G., Crosetto Paolo, Brockington Dan (2023) ‘The Strain on Scientific Publishing’, *arXiv preprint* arXiv:2309.15884.

Harvie David, Lightfoot Geoff, Lilley Simon, Weir, Kenneth (2013) ‘Publisher, Be Damned! From Price Gouging to the Open Road’, *Prometheus* 31(3): 229-239.

Herrman John (2023) ‘The Junkification of Amazon: Why Does It Feel Like the Company Is Making Itself Worse?’ Retrieved from https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2023/01/why-does-it-feel-like-amazon-is-making-itself-worse.html (accessed: 26 March 2024).

Islam Gazi, Greenwood Michelle (2024) ‘Generative Artificial Intelligence as Hypercommons: Ethics of Authorship and Ownership’, *Journal of Business Ethics* 192(4): 659-663.

Kapoor Ankur (2024) ‘The Good and the Glittery: A Commentary on the Contemporary Culture of Research and Publications’, *Consumption Markets & Culture* 27(1): 32-48.

Lee Dave (2023) ‘Amazon’s New AI Will Make Its Junk Problem Even Worse’. Retrieved from https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2023-10-30/amazon-com-s-new-ai-will-make-its-junk-problem-even-worse (accessed: 23 April 2024).

Lincoln Yvonna S. (2012) ‘The Political Economy of Publication: Marketing, Commodification, and Qualitative Scholarly Work’, *Qualitative Health Research* 22(11): 1451-1459.

Lubin Nathaniel (2024) ‘What to Do About the Junkification of the Internet’, *The Atlantic*, 12 March. Retrieved from https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2024/03/generative-ai-social-media-moderation/677730 (accessed: 25 August 2025).

Lyotard Jean-François (1984) *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge,* Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Maryns Katrijn, Blommaert Jan (2002) ‘Pretextuality and Pretextual Gaps: On De/refining Linguistic Inequality. *Pragmatics. Quarterly Publication of the International Pragmatics Association (IPrA)* 12(1): 11-30.

Mirowski Philip, Sent Esther-Mirjam (2002) *Science Bought and Sold: Essays in the Economics of Science.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Naddaf Miryam (2025) ‘AI is Transforming Peer Review – And Many Scientists are Worried’, *Nature*, *639*(8056): 852-854.

Naughton John (2023) ‘Users, Advertisers – We Are All Trapped in the ‘Enshittification’ of the Internet’, *The Guardian*, 12 March. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/mar/11/users-advertisers-we-are-all-trapped-in-the-enshittification-of-the-internet (accessed: 25 August 2025).

Newton Paul, Sreenivasan Katepalli (2021) ‘Commentary: The Publication Pandemic’, *Physics Today*, 26 May. Retrieved from https://pubs-aip-org.ezproxy.lib.uts.edu.au/physicstoday/online/29454/Commentary-The-publication-pandemic.

Nyce Caroline M. (2024) ‘The Internet Is Being Ruined by Bloated Junk’, *The Atlantic*, 15 January. Retrieved from https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2024/01/long-youtube-videos-tiktok/677130/.

Oviedo-García M. Ángeles (2021) ‘Journal Citation Reports and the Definition of a Predatory Journal: The Case of the Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute (MDPI)’, *Research Evaluation* 30(3): 405-419a.

Ojala Marydee, Reynolds Regina, Johnson Kay G. (2020) ‘Predatory Journal Challenges and Responses’, *The Serials Librarian* 78(1-4): 98-103.

Pai Madhukar (2020) ‘How Prestige Journals Remain Elite, Exclusive and Exclusionary’. Retrieved from https://www.forbes.com/sites/madhukarpai/2020/11/30/how-prestige-journals-remain-elite-exclusive-and-exclusionary/ (accessed: 25 August 2025).

Pardo-Guerra Juan Pablo (2022) *The Quantified Scholar: How Research Evaluations Transformed the British Social Sciences*, New York: Columbia University Press.

Park Michael, Leahey Erin, Funk Russel J. (2023) ‘Papers and Patents are Becoming Less Disruptive Over Time’, *Nature* 613(7942): 138-144.

Phillipson Robert (1992). *Linguistic Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Puehringer Stephan, Rath Johanna, Griesebner Teresa (2021) ‘The Political Economy of Academic Publishing: On the Commodification of a Public Good’, *PLoS One* 16(6): e0253226.

Radder Hans (Ed.) (2010) *The Commodification of Academic Research. Science and the Modern University*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Roberts Julie (2024) ‘American Dialect Society Selects “Enshittification” as 2023 Word of the Year’, Press Release: American Dialect Society 2023 Word of the Year Vote, 5 January. Retrieved from https://americandialect.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/2023-Word-of-the-Year-PRESS-RELEASE.pdf.

Shen Cenyu, Björk Bo-Christer (2015) ‘“Predatory” Open Access: A Longitudinal Study of Article Volumes and Market Characteristics’, *BMC Medicine* 13: 1-15.

Shvartsman Daniel (2024) 'Amazon: Facts and Statistics', *Investing*. Retrieved from https://www.investing.com/academy/statistics/amazon-facts/ (accessed: 21 August 2025).

Slaughter Sheila, Rhoades Gary (2004) *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Stahel Philip F., VanderHeiden Todd (2018) 'Open-Access Journals: The Future of Scientific Publishing?', *Medical Writing and Research Methodology for the Orthopaedic Surgeon*: 81-86.

Tekeste Milena (2025). 'Under pressure: Becoming the good enough academic', *Organization*, Online First. https://doi.org/10.1177/13505084251383285

Tenopir Carol, Levine Kenneth, Allard Suzie, Christian Lisa, Volentine Rachel, Boehm Reid, Nichols Frances, Nicholas David, Jamali Hamid R., Herman Eti, Watkinson Anthony (2016) 'Trustworthiness and Authority of Scholarly Information in a Digital Age: Results of an International Questionnaire', *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology* 67(10): 2344-2361.

Thomson Stephen (2019) 'Letterhead Bias and the Demographics of Elite Journal Publications', *Harvard Journal of Law and Technology* 33(1): 203-267.

Tiffany Kaitlyn (2023) 'AI Generated Junk is Flooding Etsy', *The Atlantic*, 15 June. Retrieved from https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2023/06/ai-chatgpt-side-hustle/674415/ (accessed: 21 August 2025).

Timpka Toomas (2024) 'The "Enshittification" of Online Information Services Obligates Rigorous Management of Scientific Journals', *Journal of Science and Medicine in Sport*. Retrieved from https://www.jsams.org/article/S1440-2440(24)00493-6/abstract (accessed: 25 August 2025).

Van Noorden Richard (2013) 'Open Access: The True Cost of Science Publishing', *Nature* 495(7442): 425-429.

Vermeer Danielle [@DLVermeer] (2023, 22 December) 'This Video Went Semi-Viral (230K) and Asked Handmade / Vintage Sellers Where They Went After Etsy', [Post]. X. https://twitter.com/DLVermeer/status/1737849477715878043/video/1.

Weise Karen (2021) 'Amazon's Profit Soars 220 Percent as Pandemic Drives Shopping Online', The New York Times, 29 April. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/29/technology/amazons-profits-triple.html (accessed: 25 August 2025).

Wilcox Christine (2023) 'Scientists Are Publishing Too Many Papers – And That's Bad for Science'. Retrieved from https://www.science.org/content/article/scienceadviser-scientists-are-publishing-too-many-papers-and-s-bad-science (accessed: 26 March 2024).

Willmott Hugh (2011) ‘Journal List Fetishism and the Perversion of Scholarship: Reactivity and the ABS List’, *Organization* 18(4): 429-442.

Wood Elizabeth H. (2005) ‘Open Access Publishing: Implications for Libraries’, *Journal of Electronic Resources in Medical Libraries* 2(2): 1-12.

Wright Jennifer (2024) ‘Stakeholder Management in Change Initiatives: Reddit Changes Its API Pricing’, *Sage Business Cases*. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.4135/9781071941379 (accessed: 25 August 2025).

Zuckerman Ethan (2023) ‘How to Stop the Internet Becoming a Junk Heap’, *Prospect*. 2 March. Retrieved from https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/ideas/technology/60510/how-to-stop-the-internet-becoming-a-junk-heap (accessed: 21 August 2025)