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Stuff and Things: Paying for Publication

Year

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Description

This case discusses related issues of the value of scientific information and the role played by agents of dissemination, such as journals, it also addresses ethical issues concerning the structure of institutions of science. Ethical questions about what functions the institutions should serve and how these institutions should be organized and supported force attention to conventions that should govern.

Body

The American Society of Stuff and Things (ASST) is the premiere professional organization for stuffologists and thingographers worldwide. Its journal, *Stuff and Things*, is the top-rated journal in both (related) fields. It is the only journal to cover all the subspecialties of stuffology and thingography, aiming for a broad understanding of the larger disciplines. *Stuff and Things* has been published for about a hundred years, and all institutions with stuffologists or thingographers on their faculty subscribe. In addition, many individual researchers have their own personal subscriptions. ASST has promoted personal subscriptions so that researchers will keep the journal on their shelf, where it is likely to be the first thing they reach for when looking up examples to cite. To that end, ASST has maintained cheaper subscriptions for individuals than libraries; subscriptions are cheaper still for students (to get them hooked) and third-world scientists.

ASST publishes *S&T* through an academic press, not a commercial one, and publication costs are rising rapidly. The ASST board knows that *S&T* is in financial trouble, and they are seeking solutions. At ASST's annual meeting on Hilton Head Island, the board meets to determine how to keep the journal going. The board is loath to raise subscription prices, even though they are relatively low. They are considering instituting page charges, amounting to an average of \$1000 per paper, with all the usual exceptions for researchers without the resources to pay these charges. This measure would be adequate to keep *S&T* afloat at current subscription prices.

Dr. Ethan Naylor, ASST President, objects to this proposal. He asserts that charging authors for publication is, in effect, saying that the product of researchers is not worth publishing based on its own value. If anything, he says, the board should seek to pay authors for their work, much like the rest of the publishing world.

Discussion Questions

1. Should the board even care whether *S&T* goes under? If the journal does fold, is anyone harmed? Why might the board be concerned with the "value" of the research it publishes?
2. How valid is Dr. Naylor's assertion? Can one legitimately treat research results as a marketable product? Are there values in academic publishing that make it substantively different from the rest of the publishing world?

Dr. Stephen Lewontin, the ASST board member who proposed the page charge scheme, retorts that Naylor's point is immaterial, because authors will simply use their research grants to pay the page charges, and that using grants is certainly better than charging more for the subscriptions.

Discussion Questions

3. Who should be responsible for paying for the dissemination of research results. Who is the "consumer" of the journal? Does it even matter who pays as long as the information gets out?

Listening to Naylor and Lewontin argue back and forth, Ellen van Graaf suggests that they simply avoid the issue by publishing fewer papers or switching to electronic publication, thus reducing their costs.

Discussion Questions

4. Does the value of the journal vary by whether it is published electronically or in hard-copy? What if many other related journals are moving toward electronic access?

5. How do different journals' publishing practices affect the flow of information in science? Can they affect the functioning of the scientific community? What are journals' responsibilities in the scientific enterprise?

The ASST board avoids even discussing the option of simply raising the subscription price. This strategy tacitly endorses the Society's long-standing policy of attempting to increase the journal's prestige (e.g., as measured by an impact index) through easy access.

Discussion Questions

6. Are there any ethical issues involved in attempting to manipulate the value of a scientific publication by means other than the quality of the papers published?

Notes

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