

First European Symposium of Social Science & Humanities

Journals

Brussels 22 & 23 November 2021

Online Mondays 4-6.30pm from 21 Feb. to 21 March 2022

<https://eu-ssh-journals.sciencesconf.org>



Journal work as a symbolic good, and the ethical labour of non-reproduction

Carli Coetzee, 23 November 2021

Thank you very much and thank you for accommodating me speaking here from – not from the same room as you. So, here is the journal that I edit, and you can see from the cover and from the title that it has a particular focus which maybe doesn't overlap with the very interesting presentations we heard yesterday, but I will come from another angle.

I realise that the journals in your consortium will face a range of difficult ethical challenges, but in the field in which my journal is located, African Cultural Studies, the ethical issues are intimately linked to inequalities of power and the replication of those inequalities. Our host journal, *Symbolic Goods*, alludes through its name and its project to Bourdieu's *The Market of Symbolic Goods*, which I think is a surprisingly apt description of journal work, in that it uses the language of the marketplace to talk about value and currency.

The published article and the scholarly monograph are our preferred currencies when we negotiate our careers and our professional trajectories. Yet this valuable and value-laden end product, the published article, becomes hyper-visible through routes that remain for the most part invisible. And some of this invisibility in fact contributes to the symbolic value of these publications, for example through the prestige we attach to blind peer reviewing and anonymity as part of the process which ensures impartiality and quality. But in addition to the work of the disembodied peer reviewers there are other invisible processes that underpin and enable the hyper-visible symbolic goods that calibrate our value.

Invisible labour is labour that is unacknowledged and without thanks. Invisibility removes the need for the beneficiaries of such labour to appreciate or acknowledge the labour. Part of the effect of invisible labour is precisely to delete itself. In addition, invisible labour is unregulated, which makes it hard for those performing it to organise and campaign for better working conditions. Crucially, in the case of journal work, the

invisibility and lack of regulation also fuels rumour and gossip about what exactly happens behind and during these blinded editorial decision-making processes.

Making visible the labour that goes into journal work will mean that the invisible labour will be acknowledged and rewarded but, even more importantly, by making visible this invisible labour and by valuing the work we all do – because I think all of us in the room are doing journal work – we can ensure that ethical and activist protocols are developed for evaluating knowledge production from different parts of the world. This means ensuring that all the blind peer reviewers are not in the same room, from where their blindness prevents them from seeing work with other assumptions and ideologies. In the collection *Invisible Labour: Hidden Work in the Contemporary World*, Marion Crain asks: what counts as work and why are some forms of work invisible? The edited collection addresses such questions as: what forces and trends are preventing employers, consumers and employees from seeing the work that is done, and blocking regulators and policymakers from addressing its impact?

Now, labour relations is not something that's often talked about in terms of journals, but I think it's a very important issue. What are we prevented from seeing about the way our publishing environments perpetuate certain forms of knowledge production and limit others from flourishing, because of the fact that many undervalue the political and ethical implications of journal work?

Very often one hears non-editors talk about what they imagine the environment of an editorial office is, and frequently the language used is diminutive or pejorative. And this is the kind of labour that institutions do not generally regard as intellectual labour. I don't know if that's different on the continent, but certainly in the UK it's not work that is valued. Nor do institutions regard this as labour that deserves recognition or, in many cases, remuneration. Another descriptor I've come across for the work of the journal office is "housekeeping", with its strongly gendered judgment of the kind of labour. And so, you know, when one is in conversations where people celebrate that there are now so many women who are editing journals, well, perhaps that is do with the fact that the work has become so impossible to perform, and it's become a diminished form of labour, hence many more women are encouraged to do the work, and young scholars.

A member of my own editorial board called the work that I do "the boring day-to-day stuff" as if there is some exalted realm somewhere else, and the idea is that journals really run themselves, someone just has to do some light dusting every now and then and make sure the machinery remains in motion, or alternatively that this kind of dull work is fine for some – often women – but not for those who regard themselves as the great scholars. And my argument is, as I'm sure all of you agree, that journal work is a highly intellectual form of labour – intellectual and political. Of course we all know that some editors do run journals by performing minimal labour, checking in every second or fourth Wednesday before class to see what's going on. In most cases where journals have more than one editor, there will be one editor who is known behind her back as "the lazy one". Editors are much like other people in this regard. But most editors work hard, not only managing the flows of papers that come into the virtual office, but also developing and soliciting papers.

A successful journal article begins its life cycle long before it appears in the inbox of an editor. Effective editors think ethically about the structural and political implications of

the invisible life cycle of the article and pay attention to the inbuilt inequalities that underpin these environments. Few editors are like the editors imagined by those who think of editing as “housekeeping”. My preferred metaphor for my work as editor is that of building a laboratory, and I know many of you are from the STEM subjects where you think about laboratories anyway.

John Budd writes in his essay in a book *Invisible Labour*: “the fact that specific forms of work can be invisible underscores the importance of thinking carefully about definitions and conceptualisations of work. [...] Our mental models of what work is critically shape our beliefs about who is valued as a worker and what is valued as work.” That’s the end of the quote.

If every stage of journal work is not acknowledged and recognised as work, we allow an unregulated and invisible process to determine and control that which we came to value most highly. The invisibility of the labour performed by editors and peer-reviewers means that this work often fuels rumours and mistrust. Much like the occult economies described by Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, economies that generate wealth without any visible labour being performed. The invisibility of the labour of journal editing and decision procedures fuels rumours about which authors are valued and get to add value by being selected to be published, and on the other hand which authors are not selected by the anonymous and faceless value-creating zombies.

So, more positively then, what examples are there for us to look at if we agree to take on this task of making the labour visible? *Small Axe, a Caribbean Journal of Criticism*, published an inspirational special issue with the title, “What is journal work?” The editor, David Scott, made an argument for journal work as an ethos and a project with a clear sense of purpose and vocation. Louis Chude-Sokei wrote about how peer reviewing can be a form of complicity in existing power structures and suggests ways of instead performing the work of peer review as an activist action to broaden perspectives and connect different generations of scholars.

Others in that volume draw attention to how journals can shape a field and how operating with what is called a “northern radar” can reinforce assumptions and ways of determining value. Kelly Baker Josephs calls for an end to the invisibility of editorial labour, ascribing the invisibility to a culture of individual authorship and to our limited ways of recognising the humane efforts of caring editors. A journal’s success, she writes, relies not only on the qualities of papers it publishes or the number of readers it reaches, or the kind of discussions of finances that we heard yesterday, but also on the achievements of the scholars it helps to develop and the communities it can create. These are excellent and useful protocols.

Some questions that can be asked in response are: what could be the gains of making visible the invisible labour and making evident the networks that sustain our journals? What communities do we not only represent but convene and how does this labour inform our intellectual project? Where are our peer reviewers located and how do we invest in peer review so as to open the windows and the doors between spaces? If all the peer reviewers are invested in similar debates and discussions, one is likely to have a feedback loop. Such a community might wish to guard its value and preserve it from outsiders whose labour, as a consequence, is deemed as less valuable.

This brings me again to the refereeing process, an area of explicit invisibility and a process that fuels rumour and suspicions. In some disciplines, peer review is a topic of heated discussion. In the humanities – and I don't know if this is the same for your journals, but in the journals that I'm involved in – we generally agree that double-blind reviewing is the preferred mode. Most journals require two anonymous reviewers to read an anonymous paper. The nature of our accepted peer review process means that the choice of the peer reviewer is perhaps the most important moment in the life of an article. This is one of the most difficult, charged and time-consuming tasks for an editor and the decisions made at this stage of a publication and an author's life have extraordinary weight, both ethically and intellectually.

Some editorial boards run cartels, or review within a sealed room. We generally know which journals operate like this, and we make our decisions about whether to submit to them informed by this knowledge, either knowing that it guarantees publication or that one wants nothing to do with it. But most journal editors spend a great deal of time thinking about and identifying suitable reviewers. But the suitability is not neutral: choosing a referee or a peer reviewer is deeply political. I'm sure I'm not telling you something you don't know. It's the most political and ideological part of the work of a journal and I would argue that the most important task an editor has is to make ethical choices in this regard.

So what would inform such an ethos is to make our protocols of selection explicit, to collaborate with colleagues in a range of environments on these protocols, thus jointly determining the protocols and investing in them. If we acknowledge that there is a range of context and multiple different roles for scholarship, then our peer reviewers need to be multi-located too. A form of networking we can and should map is the communities we represent, value and convene, through our bibliographies, our footnotes, our references and our acknowledgments. It's not only a matter of who gets cited, and how frequently. Bibliographies and citations are a clear and transparent way of showing who is invested in a certain kind of knowledge and in whom we, in turn, invest.

As editors and peer reviewers we should demand more of authors. Often the incomplete bibliography is understood as being a problem with papers written from under-resourced or, in the case of my journal, African universities, the assumption being that Africa-based authors cannot access the so-called cutting-edge material. Of course, I don't wish to deny the infrastructural challenges to an author working in a poorly resourced library, but remaining informed about cutting-edge arguments is a form of labour that has a very different weight and requires different forms of investment depending on where one is based.

My experience has often been that the greater problem with the absent reference is that of a scholar based in the North. Someone who is not informed about the intellectual and conceptual work that's been done outside of what she regards as the cutting-edge room. If editors choose peer reviewers who know scholarship other than that which circulates in certain self-replicating spaces, these peer reviewers will demand of authors to read articles that challenge accepted and so-called cutting-edge models and approaches.

The missing reference is not necessarily Foucault. The missing reference, I think very often, is excellent work that has been done somewhere but that it is relatively invisible. These invisible articles are often published in bulletins or small journals and by citing

such work we can invest in, for example, Africa-based publications, and thereby build them.

Labour economist Myra Strober writes in her book *Sharing the Work* about the changes she has seen in academia over the last fifty years and the changing roles that women have been able to take up in academic institutions. I alluded to my own comments about that earlier, that the rise of the number of women in certain institutions is often not a sign of health but in fact a sign of worsening labour conditions, so we shouldn't always congratulate ourselves on that so-called diversity. It's often a vector of something else. But Strober writes about the metaphor of "holding the door open", is one that she investigates on a number of levels, including domestic labour arrangements and the ways in which life partners can support, or destroy, or impede one another's career progress.

Holding the door open is a memorable phrase and a useful one for thinking about how we can create flows and circulations beyond the sealed spaces in which we are comfortable. Peer reviewing and journal editing can be forms of holding the door open for entry into mutual spaces rather than the more commonly used phrase, "gatekeeping", which we hear so often.

Another form of holding the door open is the way in which we thank and acknowledge those who've taught us or shared their local knowledge networks. The scholarly acknowledgment is an area of lively and angry debate, in particular among junior and early-career scholars. Many stories can be told of someone who is bumped out of the references into the footnotes or acknowledgements, deleted while the author of the research pretends to be bringing something and someone into invisibility. You understand what I'm saying: that someone, the work is not cited but the person is thanked. One can be thanked, for example, as I have once been, for help with language issues, when the critique you provided of the argument was complex, and the labour invested time-consuming; there are also countless stories of hearing one's ideas summarised by someone who does not acknowledge their source, and many bright and hard-working early-career scholars have sat at the back of a room and heard their own ideas used as a glittering moment in a paper by an A-list academic.

We are also familiar with the genre of acknowledgement that builds for the author a power base, symbolic goods, and serves to link her to decision-makers and superstars, showing her pedigree and the rooms in which she circulates. This is not the ethical acknowledgement that I have in mind. In Jane Guyer's important book *Marginal Gains*, she writes about what she calls "intellectual bewilderment", the difficulty of grappling with the contradictions of applying existing systems theories from one place to a place that that centre has treated as marginal and external to itself. Her solution, she writes, is to position herself on the borderland, looking in both directions. We had some interesting comments about that yesterday, in relation to language, to the different cultures of linguistic scholarship. Some people never crossing the border between the French and the English for example, or the Dutch, we had yesterday. Managing more than one interpretive framework at the same time, making decisions about which value to attach to a transaction or an exchange. And I find this description of a scholarly method, of someone standing on the borderland, very productive for thinking about the intellectual work of journal editing because we are recalibrating knowledge, information,

bibliographies, as we move between different languages and cultural and intellectual traditions.

When we come together as we do here, even though it's virtual, an exchange of sorts needs to take place, which is more than talking. In its ideal form, this exchange is not simply a validation of what we already think but instead more like a negotiation. So I want to use the image of journal work as a rapidly changing and volatile intellectual forex board, where the currencies are fluctuating alongside one another. The time and space of scholarship in its various environments is networked but also separated, and standing on these borderlands, as I think your project is trying to do, we can look in different directions and translate the currencies.

To engage with the various environments where value is created and in which we can invest, we need to be familiar with intellectual exchange rates, for example, how long does it take for someone to earn enough to buy a book, provided she can find a bookshop that stocks a copy, or can find a colleague to bring it to her in their luggage? What does one have to sacrifice in order to download a PDF of an article? I'm guessing that for you, as for me, the sacrifice of downloading a PDF is negligible, there's no cost. The value of the download, even if that download is not behind a paywall, can for some scholars be disproportionately high, compared to other things with which it must be exchanged. One might for example need to think very carefully about how much data would be used or how long a laptop can remain plugged in to charge in a home where electricity is scarce. To receive a PDF of an article crucial to one's research might mean needing to read it on the screen of a handheld device, an experience far removed from the scholar swiping a card to enter Oxford's Radcliffe Library to sit down at one of a hundred computers set aside for her use.

So my final paragraph: reflecting on our journal work as ethical labour requires of us to actively encourage and amplify discourses that are generally not documented. And I think your meeting that you've convened is an excellent example of this: to talk about the things that are generally not talked about in relation to the work of journals. We need to amplify discourses that are generally not documented, peer reviewed or published in quality journals, but in which thoughtful conversations comment and critique on these official, hyper-visible and searchable discourses. Such a project will lead us not to congratulate ourselves on the equal and mutual successes of our ethical collaborations – quite a fashionable trend, to be very certain of how much we are collaborating. Instead it will bring to the surface the complaints, the gossip and the discontent that structure and underpin the business of creating symbolic value. Thank you very much.