

Boycotting academic publishers is a career risk for young scientists

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In December 2013, professor Randy Schekman collected his Nobel prize for physiology and medicine. He also announced his decision to boycott three of the most prestigious scientific journals: Nature, Science and Cell. He accused these "luxury journals" of exerting a kind of "tyranny" over scientific research and invites others to follow his lead.

Schekman suggests that luxury journals' decisions to publish work, or not, are made according to how fashionable it is, rather than its scientific merit. He argues convincingly that such is the influence of these journals, they actually direct the type of scientific research undertaken. By pursuing their own agenda to publish work that will be cited, these journals encourage the disproportionate investment of resources in fashionable fields.

Schekman is not the first to argue these points, but he is the most prominent to state them so publicly, doing so just one week before collecting his Nobel Prize. It is not, however, the first time that academics have called for boycotts of the most prestigious journals. In 2012, British mathematician Timothy Gowers proposed a boycott of Dutch publishing house Elsevier, publisher of Cell, due to their practice of selling journals in bundles at great expense to universities.

In regards to Schekman, my experience suggests that many scientists agree with him that Nature, Cell and Science editors are too influential. To hear these views echoed by such a prominent colleague has been refreshing and well received. It is also my experience, however, that appreciation for Schekman's candour is often qualified by the statement: "It's easy for him to say that though; he's just won the Nobel Prize".

He freely admits that his career, like many others, has benefited from publishing in these journals. As a result of his success, he now finds himself in a position of great influence, a position that also affords a certain freedom from the tyranny he decries. So, as he calls on others to follow his lead, I wonder if early career researchers can be expected to answer his call?

For many of my peers - PhD students and post-doctoral scientists alike - Nature, Science and Cell continue to represent a major career goal, offering recognition and exposure for their research. After all, it was in these journals that the world first learnt of the existence of the neutron, the structure of DNA and the sequencing of the human

genome. Despite the boycotts, the lure of these revered pages remains strong.

But it's more than selfish personal gratification that continues to drive young scientists to publish here. Scientists applying for funding and positions are judged not only according to the quality of their work, but also where it is published. Having a single paper published in any of these high-profile journals can have a transformative effect on a career. If publication requires flashy work in fashionable fields then, so the argument goes, this offers the most reliable path to funding and permanent positions.

The status quo is reinforced. This exemplifies both the unwieldy influence of luxury journals as well as their importance to young scientists.

With this in mind, it is easy to understand why even scientists who support boycotts in theory might feel unable to join them in practice. Young scientists can have no reassurances that by pursuing such action they will not negatively affect their careers. Each decision to join the boycott must be taken in isolation and for every individual who does there will likely be many more who will not. The career risk is too great. .

As long as allocation of funding and positions depends on the lazy analysis of where applicants have published rather than what they have published, then many young scientists will be dissuaded from joining this or future boycotts.

Even for those students and postdocs who feel compelled to avoid these journals for moral reasons, the situation is still not simple. The decision of where to publish, especially when work is deemed to have the potential to "go high" (ie. into one of the journals in question), may ultimately lie with the senior scientist involved. Disagreements are common at this stage and many young scientists may ultimately be powerless to enforce their own decision to boycott.

I agree with Schekman that the system is in need of reform and applaud his decision to take such a strong stand. This boycott has drawn attention to the problem and proposed an active role for scientists in addressing it. The battle lines are being drawn. - it's just a pity that young, unproven scientists could find themselves stranded in between those lines.

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