

Open Access Publishing: A Key Enabler to Research Impact, Informed Practice and Social Justice

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Abstract

There is mounting pressure for university researchers to build stronger research partnerships with communities so research engagement and impact can be enacted and measured. At a perfunctory glance, the engagement and impact agenda would appear to be a win-win for researchers and end users. Through rewarding and productive university/community research collaborations, new knowledge can be produced, published and translated into policy and practice for meaningful real-world impact. Yet research impact looks less certain if practitioners, organisations, policy makers and the wider public cannot access scholarly publications because they are locked behind subscription paywalls. In this article we reflect on research partnerships, and the reasoning, rhetoric and accepted protocols in publishing research findings. We propose that open access publishing is a social justice issue that is key to social work research engagement and impact and research-informed practice.

Keywords: *Open access; Research impact; Paywalls; Social justice; Neoliberalism; Informed social work practice; Ethics*

Introduction

University research agendas in developed countries increasingly focus on academics engaging with communities and industry partners in order to achieve research outcomes that show reach, significance and local and broader impact (Fouché, 2015; Hughes, 2016; Zuchowski, Miles, Gair, & Tsey, 2019). The focus on research engagement with industry partners for real-world impact fits well with social work, a profession that seeks to engage with individuals, families and communities to achieve lasting social benefit (AASW, 2013; Hughes, 2016; Zuchowski et al., 2019). Social justice is a core value in social work alongside human rights, equity, integrity, access and the facilitation of social change (Ife, 2008; Segal & Wagaman, 2017).

In many Western countries, such as the United Kingdom (UK), Australia and New Zealand, public funds contribute to university research activities. Further, universities are required to submit to extensive assessment processes to determine their global rankings and in some cases, the level of funding received. More recently, as part of these processes, assessing bodies have shaped how research is evaluated by defining research activities and, of relevance to this article, determining the quality and the social, cultural, and economic impacts of published research.

The Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) stocktakes and ranks excellence across the full spectrum of research activity in Australia's higher education institutions, including in social work. Research impact in Australia is defined by the Australian Research Council (ARC) as "... the demonstrable contribution that research makes to the economy, society, culture, national security, public policy or services, health, the environment, or quality of life" (ARC, 2017). In Aotearoa New Zealand, a similar exercise, the Performance-Based Research Fund (PBRF) assessment system asks participating academics to submit evidence of "impact on policy, professional practice, or business processes, products, tools, or services as indicators of the social, cultural, environmental and economic benefits of the research" (Tertiary Education Commission, 2017, p. 12). In the UK, measures for research excellence include reach ("the extent and breadth of the beneficiaries of the impact") and significance ("the degree of the influence, value or effect") (Research Excellence Framework (REF), 2012, p. 54).

Research partnerships with industry are said to bridge the gap between the academy and professional practice to address entrenched social issues and produce local and broader level impact that is valid and relevant to practitioners and policy makers (Palinkas, He, Choy-Brown, & Locklear Hertel, 2017). However, over time, concerns have been expressed at the failed translation of research findings into practice (Grimshaw, Eccles, Lavis, Hill, & Squires, 2012; Watt, 2015). According to Holbrook (2019, p. 26), a growing number of scientists, policy-makers, and social scientists have argued that "science is too isolated from society" to fulfil the promise of research impact. For social work, the social benefit of research findings is highly relevant. Holden, Barker, Rosenberg, and Cohen (2012) highlighted that, while social work education provides intensive training for entry level practice, knowledge for practice is constantly changing and social workers need ongoing access to emerging research knowledge to stay informed for the benefit of service users.

Implementation science and knowledge translation focus on enabling the use of research findings in practice settings (Cabassa, 2016). Grimshaw et al. (2012) argued that, for findings to be useful, research insights need to be translated within a discipline and organisational context through meaningful engagement with practitioners. As an example, practitioners can be targeted through informative systematic literature reviews; however, without further translation, such reviews may be inaccessible to end user organisations (Cabassa, 2016). Similarly, if practitioners do not have access to research outcomes and recommendations from partnership research, they would not be aware of this new knowledge and therefore cannot incorporate it into their professional practice. Grimshaw et al. (2012) stated that planned knowledge translation is most successful if key barriers and enablers are fully identified. One key barrier between undertaking research and its implementation into policy and practice is accessibility to published research findings. As argued by Tripathy et al. (2017, p. 10), effective dissemination of research findings is vitally important to bridge the research/practice divide, and publishing in free, open access journals is a key strategy “to increase the visibility of research findings, which will in turn hopefully contribute towards changes in policy and/or practice”.

The business of publishing

If you have not seen the documentary *Paywall: The Business of Scholarship* (<https://vimeo.com/273358286>), it is well worth viewing. For some it will be an epiphany. Basically, the documentary lays bare the closed, insular business model of subscription publishing and how access to research findings is an invisible privilege open mostly to academics and students while they are studying. The following is a personal narrative to try to further illustrate how meaningful research engagement and impact ultimately may be linked to the publication destiny of the research findings.

Two of the authors recently completed partnership research with three non-government organisations seeking to optimise grandparents’ contact and relationships with their grandchildren after child protection intervention. Partners were engaged in all stages of the research. Grandparents in the study reported feeling undervalued and overlooked in decision-making about the care of their grandchildren. Many were adamant that decision-making by child protection staff was ill-informed and not in the best interests of children. A priority for partners and participants was that grandparents’ voices and stories would be heard.

Within the partnership, we had co-written several manuscripts, making clear recommendations for changes to child protection practice. After notification of our first publication in the international journal *Child and Family Social Work* (Gair, Zuchowski, Munns, Thorpe, & Henderson, 2018), the first author sent a rejoicing email to the industry partners—with a link to the online journal. In response, one of the NGO partners replied that they were happy that the article was published but they could not access it online because they could not afford journal subscriptions. The first author was embarrassed by her university-centric naivety regarding the partners’ access to the journal and was suddenly struck by the huge implications of this statement (Gair, Hager, & Herzog, in press).

In that moment, it seemed clear that most Australian government and non-government child protection services, workers, policy makers and support staff would neither hear participants' stories nor see the documented practice recommendations made in our publications unless they had paid-up journal subscriptions or they had other access arrangements. It was a jolting realisation of the gulf that remained between university-based social work research and professional practice. While the great divide between society and the *ivory tower* often has been emphasised, the authors individually had made the case to their students that research was vital to professional practice and, in these times of widened university access and participation (Pitman, 2017), the reality of the ivory tower seemed much less evident than the prevailing perception. But a crucial element in this story is accessibility. Of course, the article was immediately forwarded to the partner organisations (partners were co-authors so this action was not perceived as breaching journal copyright), and different findings from the study were published in a free, open access social work journal. However, the wider injustice was not so easily remedied. It is the case that, in some settings, public funding of research now requires that publications be made available via "open access". However, open access does not necessarily mean "free" access to subscription journals—funding grants may not include this requirement in eligible costs, and universities are unlikely to cover open access costs.

One obvious question is how can social work be "evidence-informed" if highly relevant, new knowledge and innovation cannot be accessed by practitioners and policy makers, particularly in the non-government sector, because research outcomes are published in subscription-only journals? Therefore, it could be speculated that, without significant disruption to current arrangements of publishing behind paywalls, it seems unlikely that increased university/community engagement in research partnerships would lead to informed, evidence-based practice and genuine, demonstrable research impact.

Open access publishing

Open Science is a movement towards openness and transparency in scientific processes and communications (Heise & Pearce, 2020). *Open access* in this context refers to the availability of scholarly publications (and other research products such as research data) in the public domain (Holbrook, 2019; Martin-Martin, Costas, van Leeuwen, & Lopez-Cozar, 2018). Open access is said to have proliferated after initiatives such as the Budapest *Open Access Initiative* in February 2002, and the *Bethesda Statement on Open Access Publishing and the Berlin Declaration on Open Access to Knowledge* in 2003, and the widespread availability of the internet (Heller & Gaede, 2016; Martin-Martin et al., 2018; Scherlen & Robinson, 2008; Shen & Bjork, 2015). Heller and Gaede (2016, p. 5) highlighted the social justice values inherent in The Budapest Open Access Initiative Declaration (2002):

Removing access barriers to [...] literature will accelerate research, enrich education, share the learning of the rich with the poor and the poor with the rich, make this literature as useful as it can be, and lay the foundation for uniting humanity in a common intellectual conversation ... (para. 1)

Some journals, across a range of disciplines, allow open access, making scholarly research more transparent and available to a wider audience. However, many publishers restrict free access, for example allowing free open access to First online releases or sample articles only. Some publishers allow authors to make available a limited number of free e-prints that can be promoted via social media or sent to colleagues. Nevertheless, closed, subscription-based journals are said to largely still dominate, and significant charges apply for access to these journals.

To enable academics and university students to have unlimited access, subscriptions are purchased by universities through their libraries, and then further charges are required to make specific journal articles available for open access (e.g. gold access, bronze access). It is acknowledged that, in the business of publishing, publishers would gain financial reward from economic investment. However, according to Holbrook (2019, p. 27) the current hybrid model allows publishers to “double dip” by charging for subscriptions and then charging again for open access. Access charges can be devolved to others, including funding bodies, individual authors or to readers (Martin-Martin et al., 2018; Shen & Bjork, 2015; Siler, 2017). It is the case that university archiving in library e-repositories (green access) is permitted by many journals for pre-published manuscripts, enabling a version of free open access, otherwise embargo periods, subscriptions and access charges apply (Scherlen & Robinson, 2008).

Large subscription and access fees seem to have been accepted as reasonable and legitimate by universities and academics given a journal's reputation in the academic marketplace. Journals are ranked by reputation, international editorial boards, peer-review processes, high rejection rates and extensiveness of readership. Equally, smaller journals have sought to join with more prestigious publishers to gain legitimacy, accepting that associated subscription fees and decreased access were inevitable, and even desirable. Yet many universities are publicly funded institutions; fees have already been paid through public funding for their ongoing operation, salaries and research activities. Some say progress towards free open access is steadily advancing while others complain it has moved at a “glacial pace”, hindered by journal publishers (Holbrook, 2019, p. 26).

Many academics are familiar with emerging social networks and platforms such as Google Scholar, Sci-Hub, ResearchGate, and Academia.edu that have helped researchers sidestep protocols to disseminate research findings that are otherwise hidden behind paywalls (Martin-Martin et al., 2018). These platforms often host copies of full texts with agreement from authors who appear to be breaching publisher contracts. Yet some social work practitioners may know little about the growing body of social work knowledge published behind paywalls, or the convoluted practices that may facilitate access to it. Internationally, resistance appears to be growing against high profile publishers' subscription and access fees. For example, it has been reported that some higher education institutions in Germany and France no longer are willing to tolerate skyrocketing subscription fees and they have not renewed subscriptions to journals such as Elsevier and Springer-Nature in recent years (Allen, 2018; Martin-Martin et al., 2018).

Further, Holbrook (2019, p. 27) reported that, in September 2018, “a partnership of 15 European and one US-based research funding agencies formed cOAlition S and developed Plan S to make all research funded by their agencies immediately available for free for anyone to read and reuse”. Holbrook (2019, p. 27) said Plan S, once launched more widely, could be a “game-changer”; it is supportive of social justice and international human rights, and promises to make research knowledge freely available. Similarly, Quaderi, Hardcastle, Petrou, and Szomszor (2019) reported that Plan S is expected to widen access to research and accelerate research discovery. As outlined, open access has been lauded as contributing to social justice through accessibility of research findings. However, some authors and academics may remain suspicious of the legitimacy of open access journals and the content they publish (Perkins & Lowenthal, 2016).

Identifying rogue publishers

It is reported that high-profile subscription publishers were quick to observe the growing open access movement. Further, they observed the enormous and expanding potential of internet publishing, and the growing institutional demand for increased research outputs by academics to meet prestige publishing measures. Subsequently, these publishers sought to significantly expand their stable of subscription publications (Arunachalam, 2017; Martin-Martin et al., 2018). A parallel movement appeared to discredit lesser known open access journals, inferring they were of disputable origins. A complicating factor was the rapid evolution of predatory publishers who similarly observed the economic potential of the changing publishing landscape. These journals flourished without the quality controls offered by subscription journals (Beall, 2016). Such journals, with fake metrics and non-existent peer-review processes, solicited articles and promised hastened publication dates, often after authors paid substantial “processing charges” (Nathan & Shawkataly, 2019; Shen & Bjork, 2015). Naïve academics could compromise their careers after being beguiled by predatory publishers. That said, fees charged by such journals are reportedly lower than access fees charged by more credible journals (Shen & Bjork, 2015).

Circulated lists of “predatory” or “rogue” journals soon appeared (e.g. see Beall’s list <https://bealllist.net/>), and academics were advised that if they published with these journals they risked their reputation, and that such publications would not count towards their academic workload (Arunachalam, 2017; Finkel, 2019). However, Shen and Bjork (2015) have speculated that the market for predatory journals would reduce as credible open access publishing gained momentum. Similarly, with regard to social work practice, in a recent editorial in the *Journal of Social Work Education*, Yaffe (2019, p. 211) offered a caution about predatory journals, but reflected that freely available, open-access publishing “holds considerable promise for making peer-reviewed, high quality research available to assist social workers in the evidence-based practice process”.

As inferred above, in the recent past, open access journals and rogue journals appear to have been conflated as one and the same in the minds of some observers, and broader questions appeared limited regarding who are the “rogues” in academic publishing. For example, what

are the ethical responsibilities of academics/industry partnerships, funding bodies and universities to ensure research findings are accessible?; and are there not social justice issues in publishing research findings behind paywalls especially if such new knowledge was generated through publicly funded community/university collaborations? Instead, academic institutions advised that only well-recognised publishers could be trusted with manuscripts and that paying their large fees for open access was acceptable and desirable, if you could afford it, to increase readership (Gair et al., in press). In contrast, according to Perkins and Lowenthal (2016), what is needed is discerning authors and consumers who can be alert to the quality of specific open access journals, the publisher's adherence to publishing protocols, and whether journals reflect the goals and needs of authors and the benefits and needs of the readership.

Challenging the destiny of research findings

Research findings disseminated only through the restricted scholarly marketplace of subscription journals could be seen to be the antithesis of meeting societal needs for social justice and equity. Instead of providing public access to information for the greater human good, the findings of important, taxpayer-funded research are published in journals where more public funding is needed for journal subscriptions so academics and students have access to these research findings (via university libraries), and still more funds are required for open access (Arunachalam, 2017; Heise & Pearce, 2020). As identified by Scherlen and Robinson, (2008), and later by Arunachalam (2017), what seems to have escaped academics' attention, even as they write on issues of social injustice, are the ethical and equity issues associated with open and closed publishing (Gair et al., in press).

This world of academic publishing may be unknown to industry partners, but it seems crucial to understand current processes of knowledge dissemination for evidence-informed social work. Further, in recent times, even highly reputable publishers have lobbied individual academics to personally pay open access fees to make their work more widely available (gold access). Academics worldwide may have been tempted to pay the expensive open access fees being demanded by these publishers, including paying from their own salaries, to provide open access to their publications. However, this pressure to pay appears to unreasonably shift the responsibility for dissemination onto the shoulders of academics themselves, particularly given that authors are not paid for their manuscripts (Scherlen & Robinson, 2008). Rather, researchers and their industry/practitioner partners are the unpaid labourers in this privatised publishing marketplace. Yet the product of their labour is sold many times over. Further, it is a distorted marketplace because the product—research outcomes and jointly produced knowledge—is mostly not directed towards the consumers who will benefit, rather the supply is only readily accessible to other producers (students and academics) (Gair et al., in press). If university libraries cancel their subscription to any particular journal, academic authors do not have access to their own work. Equally, as noted by Yaffe (2019), while social work educators may appeal to graduates to remain lifelong learners who keep up to date with new practice developments, most graduates will not maintain access to university libraries during their careers. Therefore, keeping well-informed about emerging knowledge published in peer-reviewed social work journals would be beyond most graduates' reach without specific access

arrangements. Such access seems unlikely, especially in the NGO sector as our partnership example identified.

One reason academics may not challenge the current business model of publishing is the importance placed on research metrics in universities. Managers seek metrics to inform academic workload calculations, the awarding of internal grants and conference funding, and in ascertaining promotion eligibility. The numbers of articles being published by academics are tallied. Further, the journal's quality and "impact factor" (a citation metric), the number of readers and citations, and a researcher's h-index factor (an additional metric) are all taken into account (Nathan & Shawkataly, 2019). This is to demonstrate the worth of a piece of research and in turn, the worth of the researcher and the university within broader national and global rankings (Warren, 2017). If academics want to be seen as worthy researchers deemed eligible for available benefits (funding, promotion) they may be reluctant to challenge the status quo in academic publishing (Rhodes, Wright, & Pullen, 2018; Warren, 2017).

Indeed, Arunachalam (2017, p. 15) proposed that many researchers feel stuck "in a rat race" where all aspects of their professional career—tenure, research grants, election as fellows of research academies, supervision of doctoral students, and research reputation—are "intimately linked to the journals in which they publish and the impact factors of those journals". Further, publishers require authors to surrender copyright of their manuscripts and "[o]nce they surrender the copyright to the publisher, authors cannot share their papers with others". Arunachalam (2017, p. 15) further argued that even "the publishing arm of some professional societies similarly function like corporate entities" in relation to their journals. Others have reasoned that professional journals are well placed to play a brokering role between academic research and end users; that is, they could take a lead in providing open access as a service to their profession (Meyer, 2010).

As pointed out by Scherlen and Robinson (2008) and later by Lincoln (2018), the advent of the internet has facilitated limitless knowledge-sharing pathways, yet it has been re-configured by some publishers for the privatisation of new knowledge. Some colleagues may argue that academic knowledge has never been freely available to the public, however this cannot fully justify continuation of a publishing "closed shop", especially in the discipline of social work. As Siler (2017) reported, academic publishing is an industry worth \$US10 billion per annum and rising, and while Allen (2018) argued that presenting research to the world should be less impeded, clearly there is enormous vested interest in the *business of publishing*.

Strategies as noted include social networks such as ResearchGate where access can be made available. Less formal strategies for dissemination of research are blogposts or making conference presentations available in the public domain via applications such as Slideshare, (a LinkedIn hosting service) (Tripathy et al., 2017). Universities could make sites available providing research summaries that can be accessed by practitioners for civic benefit. However, while universities continue to use highest impact factor publications as the primary benchmark when considering the merit of an academic's outputs, then where *manuscripts are published* counts the most.

Not seeing the forest for the trees

At some point, academics may have become so highly focused on what is needed to survive in the academy, that we have forgotten why they are there—to facilitate students' understanding of civic values, grow public knowledge, and contribute to informed practice and sustained public good (Giroux, 2002). Denzin and Giardina (2018) identified the heart of the matter when they suggested that academics' preoccupation with survival in the academy means they may no longer see the forest for the trees. In social work education we have been espousing the need for evidenced-based practice to students for years but ironically, have contributed to a lack of evidence-based practice by publishing behind paywalls. As Gil (2013) reminded us, international codes of ethics governing social work practice similarly declare that social workers must challenge injustice and pursue social change. Upholding social justice in social work incorporates a commitment and a contribution to the fair distribution of economic and social benefits and resources, the protection of citizens' rights, equity of access to information and knowledge, and importantly, citizens' rights to services informed by the latest knowledge (Gair et al., in press; Heller & Gaede, 2016; Ife, 2008; Rawls, 2003; Scherlen & Robinson, 2008; Segal & Wagaman, 2017).

Neoliberalism—a contributing factor

Notions of neoliberalism may help explain the current, fraught tertiary and publishing landscape. Neoliberalism has been identified as a set of political beliefs, values, and practices informing heightened regulation, accountability, competition and justification of public expenditure (Barner, Holosko, Thyer, & King, 2015). Almost two decades ago, Giroux (2002, p. 425) predicted that, due to the controlling and “corrosive effects” of the corporate culture under neoliberalism, civic purposes in universities would be eroded. Illuminating the prevailing environment of the academy, Barner et al. (2015, p. 6) identified that academics desperately seek to undertake research and produce multiple publications from the same study (one publisher called it salami slicing) just to survive. Without trying to shirk accountability for being self-focused, it seems necessary to name neoliberalism as a key influence in this market economy that, in turn, impacts open market access to new knowledge. Academics live with eroding conditions, uncertainty, and ever-increasing teaching, administration and service loads as well as the requirements to research and publish (Lincoln, 2018; Gair et al., in press).

While it might not have been the intended outcome, with its assumptions that higher education teaching and research can be reconfigured as a private market, neoliberalism appears to have corrupted the purposes, values, intent and destiny of research outcomes (Giroux, 2002; Petersen & Davies, 2005). Goodall (2019, p. 58) wrote that, while some authors declared neoliberalism to be dead a decade ago, others argued it operates “under the radar” to continue to repel collectivism and promote competitive individualism. Goodall (2019) further explained that early proponents of neoliberal ideology promoted its potential to bring freedom from poverty and inequality through universal involvement in the market economy. Yet, in reality, neoliberalism, underpinned by its notions of “survival of the fittest”, revealed itself to be antagonistic towards universal benefit, public good and collectivism, and predominantly to be about corporate control and competitive self-interest (Goodall, 2019, p. 77).

Disrupting the status quo

It could be said that scholarship through traditional subscription journals behind paywalls as described earlier reinforces elitism and exclusion. Further, it renders the engagement and impact agenda as little more than rhetoric, and clashes with the core values of social work including social justice, equity, access and integrity. Social work academics could be seen to have become enslaved by the neoliberal academy to the detriment of the social work profession and its core values. Many social work academics have heeded warnings against free, open access journals, instead seeing subscription journals as the safer, more beneficial harbour for their publications.

Yet, it still does not fully explain why social work academics unquestionably have gone along with and even embraced publishing behind paywalls rather than expose and resist its required subordination (Gair et al., in press). According to Petersen and Davies (2005) and others, many academics may uncritically see their stance as voluntary—i.e. they argue they get significant satisfaction out of working hard to make a difference in the community—rather than critically seeing themselves as having become performing cogs in the machinery of the all-consuming neoliberal market (Warren, 2017). Petersen and Davies (2005, p. 48) further argued that the belief in “[t]he voluntariness” of this work contributes to its “insidious” power.

Consequently, a perverse situation appears to exist where social work researchers may be working in collaboration with industry partners, and describing their projects as making a difference, but their research findings may be barely read. Unless academics actively share findings with the broader profession which may contravene copyright, or pay for open access, their research may not contribute significantly to informed practice or real-world impact. If research outcomes are published behind paywalls, then recommendations may not be read by practitioners and policy makers, and findings do not benefit the public. Equally, unless publications are distributed and read widely, they may barely contribute to the required citations count—therefore more work must relentlessly be produced.

It seems obvious to say that social work partnership research ideally would be published with the purpose and outcome of informing and improving social work practice. Therefore, radical disruption to the status quo in academic publishing seems warranted. To contribute to knowledge in the discipline, we must continue to strive and survive, undertaking research and publishing research findings. However, it seems fitting to do so whilst being much more activist against the injustices in the system because that is what social work scholarship is—research, practice, critique, and making recommendations to alleviate systemic barriers for public good and social justice. Publishing behind the paywalls of high-profile journals obstructs access to research findings and hinders research impact and innovation. Rhodes et al. (2018) called for activism to politicise academic work in the name of equality, further pointing out there is no reason why such academic work cannot be undertaken in creative ways that render it eligible to be “counted”. As noted earlier, social injustice could be said to exist where systemic inequity is evident, and access to services informed by the latest knowledge is *not* evident (Rawls, 2003; Rhodes et al., 2018; Scherlen & Robinson, 2008; Segal & Wagaman, 2017).

Some professional associations are leading the way. For example, Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers made the decision to provide their journal *Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work* (ANZSW) via free open access as an online journal from 2016. There was some criticism of the decision. As a quality, membership-funded professional journal, some members felt they were losing a “perk” of membership if the journal was available to non-members. Some members lamented the loss of the portable paper copy of each issue that could be read on the train or shared on the coffee table in the staff room. However, the discussion primarily coalesced around the issues raised in this article—that the purpose of the journal is to disseminate research to inform practice, but access had been limited by membership or subscription via institutional libraries. The old model of publishing also rendered the hard work of local researchers, including MSW and PhD students and graduates invisible to a wider world. Resistance to going “online only” was countered by a very practical argument, no hard copies meant postage costs and related environmental impacts were dramatically reduced. A year later, reflecting on the decision, the editors noted the benefits:

Offering online and open access means we have reduced the barriers to sharing Aotearoa New Zealand social work practice with the international social work community, and many overseas academics and practitioners are choosing to use our journal to publish their research. Using open access means authors, and others, are able to rapidly disseminate their scholarship, research, practice innovation and policy critique using social media such as Facebook and Twitter. (Beddoe & Ballantyne, 2017, p. 1)

The above example of ANZSW offering an open access journal to facilitate scholarship and practice innovation is one collective strategy, and more options are evident. Grimshaw et al. (2012) and others report that significant resources have been invested in online health databases and search engines that can be used by healthcare systems as part of research knowledge translation and knowledge brokering infrastructure (Meyer, 2010). For example, “Rx for Change is a database that houses syntheses of the global evidence from systematic reviews”, including “professional interventions that impact the delivery of care” (Grimshaw et al., 2012, p. 4). Social work could advance similar infrastructure.

Research teams could scrutinise funding criteria at the start of their collaborative projects to ensure dissemination costs are incorporated, and if not, could reconsider the ethics of embarking on the project. Research partnerships could fully commit to translating findings for informed policy and practice within their organisational contexts. Social work academics could commit to resisting encouragement to publish predominantly behind paywalls. It seems imperative that we challenge our own collusion in fostering elitism and negating access and equity, particularly with regard to industry partnerships. We can increasingly publish in credible, peer-reviewed, free, open access journals. We can advocate loudly for appropriate academic credit for open access publications because they enhance the impact of our research, reflect our values and civic responsibilities, and provide greater access for practitioners.

Social work educators could prescribe free open access readings in subjects they teach, in turn demonstrating to students how and where to access research findings after graduation. We can unite across universities and disciplines to encourage our institutions to stop subscribing to expensive journals. As reviewers, and editorial board members we can challenge journals we support to justify publishing behind paywalls when such action can be seen to contribute to social injustice, inequity and exclusion from emerging knowledge. We would be rejecting narrowly prescribed publishing and standing up for evidence-informed practice.

Conclusion

The recent government and university focus on research engagement with industry partners for real-world impact fits well with social work in our quest to engage with communities and achieve lasting social benefits. However, the reality of research findings being translated into valuable community benefit seems less probable when closed access publishing is the means of dissemination. Publishing research findings behind paywalls creates barriers to the implementation of evidence-based change if practitioners, organisations, policy makers and the public cannot access this scholarly work. A range of strategies are apparent to challenge, circumvent and resist the lucrative business of publishing. These strategies better reflect social work values for shared knowledge and shared benefits in our collective pursuit of social justice and meaningful research engagement and impact.

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