



The politics of journal publishing

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In a recent initiative, the Flemish Interuniversity Board has asked Vrije Universiteit Brussel (host institution of *Criminological Encounters*) to examine the phenomenon of intimidation of researchers, against the background of harassment and abuse in academic contexts. Academic freedom is, arguably, one of the corner stones of any university; a free and vigorous debate is vital to education and research, to evidence-based policy and various democratic institutions (Brennan et al., 2021). Research (particularly in the social sciences) challenges social and material arrangements and power distributions (Madison, 2011), which may spark criticism.

That scientists are challenged by special-interest groups is a healthy ingredient of the public debate, and doubts formulated by research participants and gatekeepers with regard to the position of researchers is in intrinsic part of the job (Talleh Nkobou, 2021). However, there is a thin line between a discussion between different stakeholders and intimidation of researchers. COVID-19 has highlighted the extent to which researchers who publicly share their expertise (and researchers expressing skepticism of health and security policies) face harassment and personal threats, as exemplified by the hunt in Belgium for a soldier who made threats against prominent virologists. This kind of intimidation of experts may affect the safety, well-being, and work of those who produce knowledge (Kreiter, 2014). Orchestrated attacks on researchers that seek to silence or discredit them threaten not only individual scholars but also public trust in evidence-based scholarship. It may also damage public debate, undermine the quality of policy-related discussion, and compromise public action if the environment becomes so hostile that experts can no longer publicly or openly share the results of their research (Wright et al., 2022). Inversely, intimidations and threats can generate fear and paralyze researchers, but it can also backfire and motivate researchers and activists to keep fighting, to “plan, strategize, organize and mobilize,” as rapper, actor and activist Killer Mike proposed to US protesters after the death of George Floyd¹.

A report by Scholars at Risk (2019) documented 324 verified attacks on researchers in 56 countries from September 2018 to August 2019 (Talleh Nkobou, 2021). Of course, since the death of Galileo, we know that researchers can be subject to criticism and violent attacks. Pierre Louis, for example, was vilified nearly two centuries ago for suggesting that bloodletting was an ineffectual therapy (Deyo, et al., 1997). More recently, special-interest groups such as the National Rifle Association (Deyo et al., 1997) and animal-rights activists (Loder, 2000) have threatened researchers.

In the most extreme cases, researchers lose their lives as a result of these intimidation strategies. Dom Phillips, a UK-based journalist, and Bruno Pereira, an expert on Indigenous people and a guide, travelled the Amazon for four years in order for the former to complete a book on sustainable development in the rainforest. Pereira worked for Funai, an organization which is charged with protecting Brazil’s estimated 235 indigenous tribes, and also for Univaja, an Indigenous rights organisation in the area near Brazil’s border with Peru. He clashed with the political powers-that-be, who disdained indigenous peoples and the activists working on their behalf.

Similar to journalism, academic journal publishing is a political enterprise, which should endeavour to honour activists and writers such as Phillips and Pereira who were abducted and killed while advocating for human rights, environmental rights and vulnerable groups. From the start, the *Criminological Encounters* editorial board welcomed contributions by practitioners and activists in order to call attention to pressing issues. This mission is illustrated by the interview in this issue with human rights and environment activist Claudelice dos Santos, by Marília de Nardin Budó and Marijke Van Buggenhout on the harm caused by asbestos companies. It is also evidenced by the special issue addressing research into environmental crimes, topics which generally may put researchers in the firing line by a variety of political and commercial stakeholders.

1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kSWasOhArfM>

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