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Are some nursing journal editors in danger of becoming thought police?

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Editorial

Are some senior nursing editors in danger of becoming thought police?

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One of the great privileges and pleasures of academe is the exposure to and expression of diverse ideas, which may be tested among scholars and students who hold profoundly strong, immutable and different opinions. Academic freedom, critical inquiry, respectful debate and reasoned thinking are (or should be) central to the very idea of the university as espoused by John Henry Newman in a series of lectures given in 1852 and published in an influential book (Newman, 1858). However, as we have described elsewhere (Darbyshire et al., 2021), such freedoms are increasingly under threat. It is becoming common for debate to be suppressed, if not wholly thwarted, by an imposed consensus that is intolerant and dismissive of novel or contrary views. Vitriol, dogma, intolerance, intimidation and even hatred are a growing part of current academic life, as demonstrated by recent high profile instances of 'deplatforming' or 'disinviting' public intellectuals such as Germaine Greer and Richard Dawkins and forced resignations of the UK university professors Kathleen Stock and Jo Phoenix and the US professor Peter Boghossian.

We have encountered instances of overreach where editors seemingly exceed their remit, which calls into question their impartiality, and which raises ethical and moral issues as well as scholarly ones. For instance, we have witnessed academic debate being stifled by editors refusing to publish letters to the journal or rejoinders to editorials, and where dissenting views or challenging conventional orthodoxy or the opinions of editors is not tolerated.

As scholars we have always maintained that debate over topics on which we may be diametrically opposed to others should be conducted politely and transparently. Provided that nothing untoward, libellous, or dishonest is being promoted, we also feel that—within reason—editors should not stifle such debate. Indeed, they should actively encourage it. This is best achieved by editors setting out the parameters for such debate, at least allowing an alternative view to be expressed and a right of reply. Recently, our experience has shown that this is not always the case. Moreover, recent experience has shown that some academic publishers are having more say in what gets published, quashing debate and ensuring adherence to a particular narrative (for example regarding alternative views on measures regarding the Covid-19 pandemic (Kelly & Jackson, 2021)).

An important bastion for upholding principles of freedom of speech and thought, protecting academic freedom and ensuring academics are free to promulgate and debate ideas are academic journals. In nursing, these journals are an important vehicle for nurses and others to think, discuss and write about issues with their scholarly peers without fear or intimidation from politicians, funding agencies or pressure groups. They should be free to discuss complex arguments and issues however unpalatable or controversial they seem. Rigorous scholarly debate and discussion and intellectual curiosity can be expressed freely and collegially without fear of repercussion such as reputational damage. However, and unlike in many cognate subjects such as medicine, sociology and psychology, we are witnessing signs of a creeping authoritarianism among some nursing journal editors. These editors countenance little dissent or debate, but freely use the pages of their own journals to expound their own views, thus preventing, limiting or skewing academic discourse and dictating which subjects (and, indeed, authors) are acceptable ('on message') and which are not.

A journal should be a platform for constructive debate and encouraging a range of views and opinions. Editors of academic nursing journals should respect and uphold academic freedom scholarly debate and welcome a variety of views, including dissent. Their role is not to snuff it out. Within the scope of rational argument, authors should have the right to express an opinion on an issue and let readers reach their own conclusions.

For evidence of the loss of academic freedom and debate, consider some of the most significant developments in current affairs such as Covid-19, climate change and the cultural eruption of identity politics. All of these have a transformative impact on society, on health and well-being, and on nursing. We contend that only one side of the story is permitted by many editors (Watson & McCrae, 2021): the author must support the official Covid-19 message, show sufficient concern for a putative climate crisis, or bow to 'woke' values (Kelly & Jackson, 2021).

We consider that academic nursing has come too far to let a handful of like-minded editors threaten its viability: it should be resisted firmly.

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