by Carl Rhodes | Martina Linnenluecke

When Research Becomes Junk: The Enshittification of Academic Publishing

The Internet's Decline, and What It Has to Do with Research

Something has gone wrong with Amazon. Search for a product and the results are flooded with near-identical items from anonymous third-party sellers. Scroll through Google and genuine results are buried beneath layers of sponsored content. Log on to social media and algorithmically promoted posts crowd out the people you follow. This creeping degradation of digital platforms is called 'enshittification', a term coined by writer Cory Doctorow in 2023 to describe the death spiral of online platforms that begin by serving users, then serve advertisers, and finally serve only themselves. The American Dialect Society named it word of the year.

Our own research, published this year in the journal Organization, shows that the same process is now well underway in academic publishing, with serious consequences for the meaning and value of scholarly research. The stakes are high. As this publication system degrades, the knowledge base on which management education and business schools depend is weakened, ultimately putting at risk the value and credibility of business schools themselves.

Five Stages of a Downward Spiral

We identify a five-stage enshittification process that is operating in academic publishing, and analyse how it is driven by the convergence of commercial incentives and a deeply entrenched 'publish or perish' culture.

The first stage is the commodification of research. Since the 1980s, academic knowledge has been progressively stripped of its intrinsic value and recast as a tradeable commodity. Research is evaluated not for what it contributes to human understanding, but for where it is published: specifically, whether it appears in journals on approved ranking lists. The result is what Pardo-Guerra in his 2022 book has called the 'quantified scholar', an academic whose worth is determined by scores, metrics and rankings rather than the quality or impact of their ideas.

The second stage is the proliferation of pay-to-publish models. The open-access (OA) movement, launched in the early 2000s with genuine democratic ambitions, sought to remove paywalls and broaden access to research. But commercial publishers rapidly co-opted the model. Rather than charging readers, they began charging authors, imposing article processing charges (APCs) as high as €9,500 per paper in prestige journals. Alongside extras such as proofreading and 'editing services',

> "The number of papers indexed in major databases grew from 1.92 million in 2016 to 2.82 million by 2022."

this has created a lucrative new revenue stream that has perverted the economics of publishing. Academics now effectively pay to be published, while publishers' profits are boosted, often from budgets directly funded from the public purse.

The third stage is a decline in quality and integrity. As publishers compete for volume, even the peer review process, long-regarded as the cornerstone of scholarly rigour, comes under pressure. In 2023, Web of Science delisted approximately 50 journals, including publications from prominent open-access publishers, after concerns that rapid 'special issue' growth had compromised review standards. Financial incentives to accept papers create systematic pressure to lower the quality bar.

The fourth stage is a surge in low-quality publications. The number of papers indexed in major databases grew from 1.92 million in 2016 to 2.82 million by 2022. Estimates suggest that as many as 25% of open-access journals may be predatory, existing primarily to extract fees, with over 400,000 such articles published in 2014 alone, a figure that has likely risen substantially since.

Paradoxically, this explosion of output may be suppressing genuine innovation. Research published in the journal *Nature* found that while the volume of scientific papers has grown exponentially in recent decades, it is significantly less likely to be disruptive of direction-setting.

The fifth and final stage is enshittification itself. This is the point when the scholarly system becomes so overwhelmed by quantity and distorted by profit motives that it becomes stripped of its core purpose of advancing knowledge.

Why Business Schools Should Take Notice

The leaders of business schools – deans, programme directors and those overseeing teaching and learning – might reasonably ask whether this is a problem for science disciplines rather than management education. The evidence suggests otherwise. Business schools sit at the epicentre of the forces driving enshittification.

Journal rankings in particular matter intensely in management education. Instruments such as Financial Times (FT) rankings, the Chartered Association of Business Schools (CABS) Journal Quality Guide or the Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC) Journal Quality List, which have all institutionalised a culture in which publication in 'approved' journals trumps the substantive contribution of research. When a paper's acceptance into a high-ranking journal validates it as a commodity regardless of its content, the incentives for scholars do not point towards bold, risky or genuinely innovative work. The result is a homogenisation of research that serves career advancement more than it serves knowledge.

The burden falls unevenly. Scholars facing precarious employment, institutional marginalisation or language barriers are disproportionately pushed towards the pay-to-publish market. Researchers from the Global South often face a particular double bind of needing to publish in English-language journals for international recognition while contending with APCs that can amount to a year's salary. Business

schools that champion diversity and inclusion must reckon with the fact that the publishing system they valorise reproduces precisely the inequities they seek to address.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) adds a further dimension directly relevant to management education's current concerns. The same AI tools reshaping business practice are now generating publishable-looking research at scale. While AI has many benefits, using AI tools to mass-produce papers that merely sustain the ongoing enshittification of academic publishing is not one of them. AI-driven publications pose genuine risks to the knowledge base on which educators, students but also executives and policymakers rely, and raise questions about the integrity of the research pipeline feeding into business school curricula and executive education.

What Can Be Done?

Enshittification is not inevitable. The current trajectory can be reversed, but doing so requires deliberate intervention at multiple levels. At the level of evaluation, institutions and funding bodies need to move away from journal-based metrics as a primary proxy for research quality. The Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA) offers a promising framework, seeking to rebalance evaluation towards broader assessments of scholarly contribution and societal impact. Business schools that genuinely value knowledge creation over credential-accumulation have both the incentive and the influence to advocate for this shift.

At the level of publishing infrastructure, a return to not-for-profit models through academic societies, university presses and institutional repositories would prioritise dissemination over extraction. Cooperative publishing models, in which governance returns to scholarly communities, offer a structural alternative to the commercial oligopoly that currently dominates the market.

At the level of culture, the 'publish or perish' imperative needs to be critically examined. This includes a limit on incentives that reward volume over quality, the recognition of more diverse forms of scholarly contribution, and the desire for genuine accountability for research integrity are changes that business school leaders are well-positioned to champion.

A Leadership Challenge

It would be easy to dismiss concerns about academic publishing as the grievances of frustrated scholars. The evidence suggests something more serious. Business schools are enmeshed in the systemic erosion of the infrastructure through which knowledge is produced, evaluated and disseminated. Global academic publishing is a USD 19 billion industry, with some publishers reporting profit margins that rival those of Microsoft or Google. For publishers, the commercial logic is as coherent as it is exploitative. The question for everyone else is whether research should be treated as a public good or reduced to a commodity.

The enshittification of academic publishing sits at the intersection of AI automation, the attention economy, institutional responsibility and the obligation of management education to generate knowledge that is genuinely useful to organisations and society. Business school leaders helped create the incentive structures driving this system. They are therefore not only implicated in the problem but uniquely positioned to change it.

USD 19 billion industy

Global academic publishing is a USD 19 billion industry, with some publishers reporting profit margins that rival those of Microsoft or Google.

About the authors

Carl Rhodes is Professor of Business and Society at UTS Business School, University of Technology Sydney.

Martina K. Linnenluecke is Professor of Environmental Finance and Director of the Centre for Climate Risk and Resilience at UTS Business School. Their paper, The Junkification of Research, is published in Organization (2025), DOI:10.1177/13505084251399576