



SSPH+

SWISS SCHOOL OF
PUBLIC HEALTH

A FOUNDATION OF
SWISS UNIVERSITIES

BFH

Berner Fachhochschule

EPFL

Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale
de Lausanne

SUPSI

Scuola universitaria professionale
della Svizzera italiana

UNIBAS

Universität Basel

UNIFR

Université de Fribourg

UNIGE

Université de Genève

UNIL

Université de Lausanne

UNILU

Universität Luzern

UNINE

Université de Neuchâtel

USI

Università della Svizzera italiana

UZH

Universität Zürich

ZHAW

Zürcher Hochschule für
Angewandte Wissenschaften

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Sent via email - Distributor: see bottom

Zürich, 30.12.2024

Regards: Request to abstain from downgrading the Swiss School of Public Health journals to “grey publishing level 0”

Dear Petri Karonen and Janne Pölonen

As the mandated representative of the Swiss School of Public Health (SSPH+) Directorate for SSPH+ journal matters, it is my duty to contact you with highest urgency with the request to properly list and qualify our prestigious [society journals](#), the International Journal of Public Health (IJPH) and Public Health Reviews (PHR).

We took [note](#) (last accessed 30.12.2024) with utmost surprise of the offensive plans of JUFO to downgrade our journals as of January 2025 to “gray publishing” Level 0. The decision comes not only with shaky arguments – see Annex – but lacks any evidence-based rationale and violates standards of academic decision making. Most surprisingly, the decision has been taken without contacting the SSPH+ Directorate, the independent SSPH+ Editorial Managing Office of the journals or any of the six Editors-in-Chief (EiC) to discuss the matter.

JUFO even refused to juxtapose the factual characteristics of our journals with the [level 1 criteria](#) listed by the Publishing Forum. A fast check would immediately confirm that the SSPH+ journals qualify for a high level given that both journals meet all 7 criteria unconditionally and without restriction.

I myself act as Co-EiC of IJPH since many years, and in my SSPH+ supervisory role I have deep insights in all decisions of PHR as well. I can confirm that the JUFO plan is equally unfounded, offensive, and unacceptable for both, IJPH and PHR. The six EiCs – all respected scientists in their fields – take full responsibility of all editorial decisions of [IJPH](#) and [PHR](#), thus, in case the JUFO proposal would be adopted, I have to inform our editors that their dedicated work gets offensively put in question by the JUFO steering committee.

Facts are:

- SSPH+ – the sole owner of IJPH and PHR – is a not-for-profit Foundation of thirteen Swiss universities (fourteen as of 1.1.2025 with ETH Zurich joining SSPH+) embracing all leading academic positions in the multidisciplinary field of public health sciences in Switzerland.
- IJPH has a history of more than 100 years as an independent society journal, led by established scientists who volunteer as editors and reviewers.
- The same is true for PHR, which has been an independent society journal as well during its similarly long history. I was leading the 2021 transfer of PHR from its previous owner – the Association of Schools of Public Health in the European Region (ASPHER) to SSPH+. Indeed, thanks to the investments of SSPH+, PHR could be saved as an independent society journal, led by independent editorial boards. SSPH+ prevented the unfriendly take-over planned by SpringerNature/BMC – the former publisher of PHR who kept ASPHER under an outrageously aggressive slavery contract to maximize revenues while providing minimal publisher services.

- d) Since 2021, both SSPH+ journals are fully Open Access (OA) – a movement enthusiastically endorsed by SSPH+. The transition to OA was made after an intense 2-years investigation and tender with six publishers to contract OA publishing services from a professional publisher. I was leading this process on behalf of SSPH+, thus, gained deep insights into the publishing business and the attitudes of several hybrid and OA publishers. SSPH+ ultimately decided to refuse the OA offer of SpringerNature – the publisher of IJPH for many years until 2020. Their attitudes in the tender provided clear proof for the hidden Springer agenda to jeopardize and postpone the SSPH+ move to OA as long as ever possible. Thus, in the last step of the tender, SSPH+ decided to contract Swiss-based *Frontiers* to provide the publishing services in the future. The decision happened after an intense but entirely unsuccessful search for evidence that would endorse adverse reputational rumors spread by some circles.
- e) With this step, SSPH+ replaced an intransparent obscure contract hold with Springer with a crystal-clear, fair and honest contract with *Frontiers* as the new provider of the OA publishing services.
- f) Although the OA transition was extremely stressful as it coincided with the pandemic publishing drama (and its harsh consequences on the Impact Factors 2024 seen in all leading journals of the field), and the fact that *Frontiers* has still to work on some technical bumpers to simplify the work flows, *Frontiers* has proven to be a strong, unambiguous and visionary partner and supporter of Open Access publishing. Its unrestricted efforts to protect our journals from paper mills and other frauds and threats to the quality is cutting-edge and pro-active to a degree never seen with Springer. Frauds have become extremely tough challenges, impossible to be properly addressed by small journals without the strong, agile and innovative support of professional publishers. Thanks to initiatives led by *Frontiers*, PHR received its well-deserved Impact Factor – a strategy never pursued by BMC in the previous years. The *Frontiers* initiatives to establish tools to score and honor academic services of reviewers and editors are highly welcomed as they coincide with the SSPH+ vision to further strengthen the quality of the peer review process and to honor the academic services of editors and reviewers – the corner stone of quality publishing. We also witness in many ways what we heavily missed with Springer, namely, that *Frontiers* leaders are carried by a strong interest in the advancement of open science. [Frontiers for Young Minds](#) or the [Frontiers Planet Price](#) are vivid examples for the dedication to give parts of the revenues back to the scientists and the society. These engagements contrast refreshingly with the purely share-holder driven values of Elsevier, SpringerNature and other large private hybrid publishers.
- g) Most importantly, IJPH and PHR kept full independence in all editorial matters also under the new contracts. Thus, *Frontiers* – just like Springer in the past – has zero influence on any editorial decisions of the SSPH+ journals. In addition the move to *Frontiers* finally provided SSPH+ full freedom to accept all relevant articles that successfully pass the rigorous review process of IJPH or PHR. This freedom stands in strong contrast to Springer's dictate of annual publication quota. During all the years under the Springer contract, until 2020, the IJPH Editors in Chief were forced to reject submissions in the pre-screen process not based on quality but to comply with the very restrictive annual quota dictated by Springer (also see Annex about the unethical manipulative motivation for such quota, adopted by most if not all hybrid publishers).

The independence of the SSPH+ journals entails in particular the entire editorial strategies (e.g. decisions on calls, types of papers etc.), the selection of editors and reviewers, the peer review process and all related decisions, the setting of APC fees and decisions on fee waivers. *Frontiers* is not at all involved in any of these issues and decisions. Indeed at no point in time have we seen any attempts of the publisher to influence editorial decisions. The latter stand in strong contrast to the known interference of, e.g., Elsevier with

decisions taken by its independent editors.

- h) Regarding the APC, SSPH+ journals must be economically self-sustained (no public subsidies). Thus, SSPH+ APC fees (2000-2300 CHF per published article) must cover all related costs, including the (fair and) fixed publishing fee SSPH+ pays to Frontiers (for each *published* article only), the running of the independent SSPH+ Editorial Managing Office, the Editorial Board meetings, a flat rate in support of handling editors' services, and the SSPH+ fee waiver program for authors from low-income countries.

In sum, the JUFO decision lacks the evidence and rationale to classify SSPH+ journals as “gray publishing Level 0”. Given that SSPH+ journals comply with the most rigorous international standards of scientific publishing, the JUFO proposal to label IJPH and PHR as “gray publishing” is an unacceptable offense of the international community of leading scientists who act as authors, reviewers and editors of the two SSPH+ journals.

Thus, I urge you to abstain from the planned downgrading and any other steps that question and damage the reputation of SSPH+ journals, editors and reviewers. Instead we ask to be listed in Level 3 given the quality and international outreach of the SSPH+ journals.

Last but not least, the JUFO [news](#) (accessed again 30.12.24) raise many red flags about the rationale, biases and possible conflicts of interests prevailing in the JUFO steering board. Thus, let me add a few personal thoughts in the Annex, with the hope that the steering committee will stop its unqualified downgrading plans – as requested indeed by several scientists – to reflect instead on the question, why and how conspiracy-like rumors were able to influence majority decisions of an academic steering committee. Needless to say that JUFO is by no means the only academic board that has fallen into the trap to put the reputation of Frontiers into question with flawed and unsubstantiated arguments while ignoring (if not actively white-washing) the unethical paywall business model of many hybrid journals and the disgustingly excessive APC fees (3-4 times above our own APCs) charged by major Elsevier and SpringerNature brands (and paid with tax money) to please the share-holders rather than to advance the open sharing of good science.

Feel free to forward this letter to whom it may concern.
With best regards and thanks for fast action



Nino Künzli

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ANNEX to the SSPH+ request to abstain from downgrading the Swiss School of Public Health journals as “grey publishing level 0”

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These are further personal comments pointing out to various questionable underlying biases that seem to guide some majority decisions taken by the JUFO steering committee. This is important in light of the fact that a range of implicit and explicit opinions spread by JUFO correspond very much to aggressive defamations circulated by some scientists and by anonymous sources against some Gold OA publishers, including Frontiers. To prevent the collapse of the peer review publishing, it is crucial that scientists become part of the solutions of sustainable high quality peer review publishing. Instead, too many scientists have meanwhile become part of the problem instead of the solution with their unreflected spreading of conspiracy-like rumors about the “good and the bad” in the publishing domain. It is time to abate such escalations and to call for unbiased evidence-based strategies and policies to strengthen high quality OA publishing. Arrogant and unfounded “gray area” listings must be halted. We need instead fair partnerships of all relevant constituencies, (namely leading OA publishers, OA journals, societies, editors, reviewers, authors, libraries and the public funders) who share the vision of open science and OA.

In **YELLOW** are citations of the [news](#), last time accessed on 30.12.2024. My commentaries relate to the field of health sciences as I cannot judge the issues in other fields. For those interested in further details, feel free to watch my provocative Distinguished Lecture «Can we prevent the collapse of scientific publishing? A wake-up call from a retiring species» <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vgckIMRrHA0> delivered at the Epidemiology EEPE summer school in July 2024. The lecture shares various facts about the publishing business mentioned below.

“Gray area journals make use of APC operating model...”

This is a classic element of the a narrative where challenges in the publishing domain get reduced to the APC model, whereas the unethical subscription-based pay-wall and hybrid models remain unaddressed. The JUFO text leaves the impression that the “gray area Level 0 label” to be restricted to journals with the APC model? Thus all others, such as subscription based journals cannot fall into this “gray area Level 0”? It is a very misleading and biased perspective on today’s publishing business – perverted long before the emergence of APC models. The move to Open Science with OA as one of it corner stones is a strong vision JUFO should unambiguously endorse. Apart from the niche of a few Diamond OA journals, the APC model is currently the only viable model for successful Gold OA.

JUFO's mission is to encourage, monitor and make visible the quality and transparency of scientific publishing.

The planned listing of SSPH+ journals (and many other journals) as “gray area publishing” is proof that JUFO has no strategy nor any clear plan to assess and monitor quality of journals or to provide transparency. See the above letter and the various comments following below.

To propose a random selection of journals as “grey area Level 0” and to invite the science community to challenge the list in providing the rationale for alternative grades is an unacceptable and shameful approach. It is the duty of the JUFO panel to make such assessments *prior to victimize a journal, thus, the responsible editors and reviewers, as “grey area Level 0”*.

One of the most important changes in scientific publishing in Finland is the sharp increase in the number of articles published especially in MDPI and Frontiers open access journals operating with APC fees (Hansen). The scientific community's key concern is, whether the costs of open access publishing increases unreasonably, and whether the increase happens at the expense of a thorough quality assessment.

I come to the conclusion that the JUFO steering committee is either not aware of – or explicitly endorses – the unethical manipulation of many traditional hybrid publishers – in particular SpringerNature and Elsevier – to keep full control of the total number of published articles. Many leading hybrid journals take all efforts to keep those quota stable, since years. However, the (mostly tax funded) public health sciences are growing steadily since several decades (some 5-8% increase per year – ignoring the extreme peak seen during the pandemic). Some senior scientists promote the unfounded narrative that

61 the growth is due to poor quality alone. However, there is no scientific evidence proofing a general
 62 decline of quality of peer reviewed articles (apart from obvious fraud of scientists who are ready to
 63 escape peer review with fraudulent journals or make use of paper mills and other unethical misbehaviors)
 64 nor any solid proof that the claimed decline – if any – was restricted to OA journals published under the
 65 APC model. In fact, investigations about retraction rates clearly show that a range of hybrid journals from
 66 the biggest private publishers rank equally high with retractions of poor quality publications as some Gold
 67 OA journals.

68
 69 Keeping the number of published articles artificially stable is a major threat against the advancement of
 70 the growing science and in particular a threat for the careers of junior scientists. High quality science can
 71 only advance if good quality peer-review journals accommodate the inherent natural growth seen –
 72 fortunately – globally in public health sciences (and other sciences). However, leading journals – typically
 73 hybrid journals – refuse the responsibility to accommodate the natural growth in the field to protect the
 74 subscription-related business model. The conflicts of interest are obvious: first, each additional article
 75 published by a subscription journal comes with additional costs for the publisher but no revenues, thus,
 76 annual publication quota allow to protect and steer the profits. Second artificial annual quota are a prime
 77 strategy to get (in case of new brands) or to secure a high Impact Factor (IF). This manipulative strategy
 78 is particularly dominant in all new titles of the Nature (SpringerN) and Lancet (Elsevier) business model.
 79 The number of publications is kept rigidly and highly restricted and selected to booster the IF from the
 80 very beginning.

81 Instead of addressing these fundamental problems in the quota and IF driven business model of mega-
 82 publishers such as Elsevier and SpringerN, JUFO points the finger to those publishers that contribute to
 83 the accommodation of the growing demand. With this bias, JUFO also endorses the drastic
 84 consequences quota and IF manipulation models have on global inequity: stable annual publication quota
 85 amplify the enormous barriers for scientists in low-income countries. As bluntly demonstrated in my
 86 [Lecture](#), scientists from low-income countries are basically excluded from publishing in brands such as
 87 Lancet Global Health or Lancet Public Health. Leading authors publishing in those journals are affiliated
 88 by and large with research institutions in the UK, USA, a few European countries and China (see my
 89 Lecture). Lancet Global (!!) Health editors reduce the global research community to less than 20 countries
 90 (2023). Accepting only papers from leading research institutions coupled with restrictive quota are an
 91 essential – and very successful – element of the Impact Factor manipulation strategy mastered by
 92 Elsevier and SpringerNature brands alike.

93
 94 **The only solution for SSPH+ to escape the ill-defined quota system also enforced by Springer in**
 95 **IJPH was our move to Frontiers. Since 2021 the one and only reason to be rejected by IJPH and**
 96 **PHR editors is the scientific quality – i.e. a negative peer review – rather than quotas defined by**
 97 **the business model of the publisher.**

98
 99 JUFO also ignores the instrumental role of leading academic authorities. It is the prevailing attitude of the
 100 vast majority of leading scientists in all leading positions throughout academia to accept the citation
 101 based Impact Factor as the one if not only currency to define success and “quality” (still true, many years
 102 after launching DORA!). Shareholder-driven private publishers such as Elsevier and SpringerNature build
 103 their new OA business models first and foremost around the Impact Factor given that scientists still
 104 accept to pay far higher APC fees if the IF is high. Moreover, the pressure set by senior scientists on
 105 juniors to publish has steadily increased, thus, the demand for publishing is growing even more. For
 106 example, various Chinese universities meanwhile require at least one peer review article being published
 107 to qualify for a Masters degree (!) – a pressure meanwhile resulting in strong pressure on Bachelor
 108 students (!) to also publish a paper.

109
 110 The very weak assessment of Hansen et al – the only reference used by JUFO to build its case against
 111 MDPI and Frontiers – completely ignores highly relevant trends that also contribute to the strain in the
 112 publishing domain. To endorse the *a priori* chosen narrative (and purpose of the analyses) that the strain
 113 is explained by special issues of Gold OA publishers, Hansen et al restrict their assessment of the growth
 114 to the trends in the number of PhD students. With this trick, the increase in the OA papers
 115 accommodated by the largest Gold OA publishers (MDPI and Frontiers) appear to be disconnected from
 116 the scientific production (indicated with the PhD students).

117
 118 The deep addiction for Impact Factors and the “publish-or-perish” culture are invented, caused and
 119 endorsed by academia - not by the traditional nor the OA publishers! Academic leaders – not publishers
 120 or journals - force scientists to search for journals that accommodate the growing demand. Academic
 121 boards – not the publishers – decide to abuse tax money to cover outrageously high APC fees in the
 122 range of 6000-10'000+ USD for publications (e.g. the Lancet and Nature brands). Without the support of

123 academic boards and committees run by leading scientists, insane predatory behaviors of private
 124 publishers such as Elsevier would never be possible. Scientists – not publishers – decide to submit to
 125 fake predatory journals. Scientists, not publishers, might opt for the salami slicing of papers into several
 126 publications. Scientists, not publishers, decide to submit papers to more than one journal, simultaneously.
 127

128 In sum, academia fosters various manipulations prevalent in the publishing business that jeopardize the
 129 advancement of open science and open access publishing. Prior to use unqualified statements about the
 130 “sharp increase”, the JUFO steering committee should shed unbiased transparency on the natural growth
 131 of (good quality) science and provide criteria to define the quality of a journal instead of engaging in
 132 scoring and listing of “grey area” journals in the absence of any standardized assessments. Given the
 133 rather strong scientific record established by many journals of Frontiers (and MDPI), the “sharp increase”
 134 of its publications – particularly during the pandemic – is not surprising at all but a direct consequence of
 135 the manipulative attitudes of all the hybrid journal publishers that that comply with publication quota to
 136 protect their revenues. Even the enormous strain caused by the pandemic, where the global scientific
 137 community got the opportunity to focus on publishing, was by and large digested by the Gold OA
 138 publishers put in question by JUFO. Please be aware that the bashing on the largest Gold OA publishers
 139 – Frontiers and MDPI – results in essence in encouraging scientists to submit their work to highly
 140 overpriced hybrid and subscription journals. SSPH+ is heavily engaged to move its Gold OA journals into
 141 a Diamond/Platinum OA model to be free for authors and readers. However, Diamond publishing remains
 142 a very minor niche given that public funds is channeled to cover overpriced subscriptions and Gold OA
 143 APC fees instead of supporting independent journals to publish Diamond OA. Academia and academic
 144 committees such as the JUFO steering board – not the publishers – make those (biased!) funding
 145 decisions. Academia – not the private publishers – should come up with innovative plans to foster and
 146 fund Diamond publishing as a prime strategy to remove the various conflicts of interest inherent to
 147 subscription- based, hybrid, and APC-based Gold-OA publishing.
 148

149 JUFO should also not raise the vague question **whether the increase happens at the expense of a**
 150 **thorough quality assessment** but instead provide criteria to assess the quality of journals. This should be
 151 done prior to create obscure “grey area” listings.

152
 153 **MDPI and Frontiers journals are critically debated in the international [scientific community](#).**
 154

155 It speaks to itself that the committee uses this Hansen et al paper to underscore the questioning of
 156 Frontiers and MDPI. The Hansen et al paper is an example how conspiracy-like bubbles get promoted
 157 and applauded among a circle of scientists who have lost the compass for unbiased assessments of the
 158 publishing business. The paper grossly misses the opportunity to highlight fundamental perversions of the
 159 hybrid / subscription business model defended by the big traditional publishers – including the above
 160 mentioned annual quota. With its focus on “special issues” it blinds, a priori, problems caused by those
 161 hybrid publishers. Subscription journals have zero interest in the promotion of scientific topics via “special
 162 issues” or “calls” – a strategy that jeopardizes both, the quota strategy to keep the number of publications
 163 artificially low and the manipulation of the Impact Factor.

164 The purely ecologic correlation analyses of Hansen et al ignore also the highly relevant distinction of
 165 journal owners versus publishers. Many prestigious journals – at least in the health field – are owned by
 166 not-for-profit societies (such as ours). In most of these cases, publishers have no influence on editorial
 167 decisions. Hansen et al – like the JUFO committee – also blinds the fact that the quality of journals (and
 168 special issues) does not depend on the publisher but on the model, role and work of the EiC, the editorial
 169 boards and the reviewers.
 170

171 Hansen et al is particularly out of touch of the real problems and strains in the current scientific publishing
 172 business in their mediocre assessment and discussion of the time needed for the peer review. The vast
 173 majority of journals and manuscripts suffer from far too long, redundant and repetitive peer reviews –
 174 including our own journals and indeed the journals owned by Frontiers. Instead of questioning the
 175 surprisingly narrow distribution of the rather fast review cycles seen in MDPI journals, science-oriented
 176 independent and unbiased editors would instead welcome constructive strategies to shorten the lengthy
 177 peer review and solutions to abate one of the underlying causes of far too long review cycles, namely the
 178 unprecedented [reviewer crisis](#). Meanwhile, 95% of scientists prefer to only publish in peer review journals
 179 but decline invitations to act as reviewers! This again is caused by the scientist – not the journals nor the
 180 publishers. Indeed, the latter have no other choice than sending floods of invitations and reminders to
 181 review to secure two reviewers!
 182

183 Hansen et al ignore the threatening strains caused by the “rejection cascade” still accepted and caused
 184 by the scientific community – not the publishers! A large number of “rejection decisions” is not driven by

185 quality issues but by purely strategic decisions of publishers (see above manipulation with publication
 186 quota and Impact Factor management, applied by most hybrid publishers) or the pride of editors to
 187 demonstrate high rejection rates – a highly questionable indicator, perceived though by many researchers
 188 as a marker of “quality”. However, the rejection cascade is in itself a threat and another cause of the
 189 strain faced by the research communities to engage in repeated though redundant review cycles. An
 190 alarming internal analyses of Frontiers showed that an extremely large number of manuscripts once
 191 rejected by Frontiers journals got published elsewhere in journals of traditional hybrid and of Gold OA
 192 publishers alike. This inefficiency is a major cause for the reviewer crisis. Again, it is caused by scientists
 193 – not the publishers.

194
 195 Last but not least, the JUFO committee has fallen into the same trap as, for example, the Swiss National
 196 Science Foundation (SNF) in using Hansen et al to indistinguishably bash on Frontiers and MDPI as
 197 rational for obscure policies such as the Level 0 listings. However, a closer unbiased look at the Hansen
 198 et al analyses reveals fundamental differences between Frontiers and MDPI. For a wide range of
 199 indicators analysed and discussed by Hansen, Frontiers and MDPI tell entirely different stories with no
 200 evidence to downgrade the two while leaving the others untouched. The data give no indication to
 201 downgrade Frontiers while keeping journals of traditional publishers out of discussions. Nevertheless,
 202 JUFO uses Hansen et al to co-bash MDPI and Frontiers. A SNSF committees has fallen in the same trap
 203 with its decision not to pay APC fees for articles published in “special issues”. Despite providing 10
 204 undisputed argument against this policy, summarized in an [editorial](#), SNSF adopted this odd policy in
 205 February 2024. SNSF used the Hansen paper – reviewed and indeed strongly promoted by a few
 206 influential SNSF scientists – as the sole basis for this odd policy despite the absence of any evidence for
 207 the implicit claim of SNSF, that SNSF-funded scientist would publish lower quality manuscripts in special
 208 issues and the better ones in regular issues. The SNSF decision makers are obviously not aware of the
 209 fact that the peer review quality of all articles – be it in regular or special issues – depend on the quality of
 210 the editors and reviewers.

211
 212 Instead of citing Hansen et al, the JUFO board could as well refer to a broader literature dealing with the
 213 conspiracy-like biases inherent to these discussions – e.g. the BMJ editorial of [Owens](#). After some
 214 mention of Elsevier and Springer, he bluntly concludes in citing Dupuis (a librarian in Canada) who
 215 emphasized: “I don’t have a lot of sympathy for the idea that Frontiers is any worse”. This notion is in line
 216 with the excellent book of Amy Koerber et al (The predatory paradox). The authors emphasize that the
 217 true problems and challenges in scientific publishing – and those are huge and numerous – cannot and
 218 should not be put into “black-and-white” categories. The JUFO committee must urgently find ways out of
 219 this “black and white trap” to instead promote evidence based regulations to foster high quality open
 220 access publishing.

221
 222 **The principle of JUFO has been that the level of the publication channel should not be determined on the**
 223 **basis of the publisher, but that each journal is evaluated independently.**

224 Very obviously, JUFO does indeed the opposite. The only reason JUFO plans to downgrade our journals
 225 must be the fact that SSPH+ journals contracted Frontiers as the publisher. JUFO failed to have any
 226 closer look at the journals per se. Needless to say that JUFO failed to evaluate the journals independently
 227 but was fully trapped by its unfounded biases: had SSPH+ kept the publishing contract with the
 228 aggressive hybrid publisher Springer, IJPH and PHR would never appear on the grey area Level 0 list!

229
 230 **...For example, no absolute requirements about the journal’s JUFO level should be set for the sub-**
 231 **publications of the PhD dissertations.**

232 This is a very naïve wish of a committee that seems to act in a bubble far out from academic realities.
 233 After 35 years as a public health scientist in academia, it is crystal-clear to me that a Level 0 assignment
 234 heavily influences the PhD dissertation supervisors. Namely, a supervisor who cares about the careers of
 235 young scientists will certainly advise a PhD student to abstain from considering any “grey area Level 0”
 236 journal for their PhD thesis! “Grey area” sends the unambiguous message that such journals should not
 237 be trusted, thus, better be ignored. Needless to say that the defamation is indeed the ultimate purpose
 238 and result of the obscure, biased and unfounded “gray area level 0” proposal. The above cited disclaimer
 239 does not change the fact that JUFO promotes a direct threat for the future development of the SSPH+
 240 journals.

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 242
 243
 244
 245

JUFO contradicts and ignores Nr 4 of its evel 1 Criteria

246
247 Criterion Nr 4 states: **“Editorial board: The publication channel’s editorial board constitutes of experts,**
248 **who mainly include researchers working in universities or research institutes.”** It is fully in line with the
249 **Guidelines of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors. The 2024 update states,**
250 **under 2. Editorial Freedom, editors-in-chief have full authority over the entire editorial content of**
251 **their journal and the timing of publication of that content. Journal owners should not interfere in the**
252 **evaluation, selection, scheduling, or editing of individual articles either directly or by creating an**
253 **environment that strongly influences decisions.**

254
255 Why does JUFO blind role of editors as the prime determinant of peer review quality? Although this
256 guiding principle alone cannot guarantee quality, it is an underlining condition to guarantee independence
257 in the scientific publishing decision process – independence in particular of the business model of the
258 publisher.

259
260 The business model of Elsevier and SpringerNature with all their new Lancet and Nature brands fully
261 ignores the above Guidelines and Criteria 4 for JUFO Level 1+. The traditional appointment of
262 independent editors-in-chief and handling editors has been dumped by the publishers of these leading
263 brands. EiCs and handling editors of all Lancet and Nature brands are neither independent nor experts in
264 the field - nor are they working at universities or academic institutions. Instead, Elsevier and
265 SpringerNature handed over the key decision making editorial responsibilities to **staff members, hired**
266 **and controlled by the publisher.** Most of these EiC and handling editors – at least true for all those
267 brands relevant to my own field of research – are junior scientists, typically holding a PhD but without any
268 independent scientific record nor specific expertise in the field of the journal. The consequences of a peer
269 review led and decided by junior non-experts can be detrimental, as demonstrated in our [editorial](#). It was
270 written in reference to trash science that passed the peer review of Lancet Planetary Health. Neither the
271 EiC nor the handling editor of this absurd manuscript are experts or scientists trained to judge the false
272 methods applied in this ecologic study! Although the Lancet editors are meanwhile fully aware of the
273 faulty publication, it has not yet been retracted while it fosters the journals Impact Factor in attracting
274 many citations given the “novel” though outlandish conclusion of the paper – namely that 30+% of all
275 deaths due to antibiotic resistance would be caused by ambient air pollution (my research expertise)....
276 Efforts to achieve retractions are left to the scientist whereas the publisher remains silent and inactive
277 since two years.

278
279 To camouflage the scandal of keeping unqualified staff members as EiC and handling editors, these
280 “leading” brands feature “Advisory Boards”. A closer look make it clear that these Boards have no
281 authority nor any role what so ever; it is nothing but a name-dropping exercise using prominent scientists
282 to pretend “quality assurance”. I personally contacted several *Advisory Board” members of Lancet
283 brands. All unanimously confirmed that they had never had any role nor any involvement in the editorial
284 processes of the journals they “advice”. Where is the outcry of JUFO visavis such unethical attitudes of
285 Elsevier?
286

287 If JUFO would apply criterion 4. – i.e. the independence and qualifications of the editorial decision makers
288 - the list of “grey area Level 0” journals would look very different and indeed contain all new Lancet and
289 Nature brands, thus, become in essence a list of OA and hybrid Elsevier and SpringerNature journals.
290 The decision-making editors should never be staff of the private publisher given that publishing decisions
291 should not be dictated by the business model and the share-holder values of these companies! Conflicts
292 of interest are very strong and in essence inevitable in such an editorial model.
293

294 To the best of my knowledge, none of the Frontiers journals have adopted the symbiotic model where
295 publishers would control the editors. It is not my role to assess the JUFO level for the claimed
296 downgradings. However, to see *Frontiers in Public Health* listed as Level 0 underscores once again my
297 claim that the decision of JUFO is fundamentally uninformed, biased and grossly flawed. Why else is this
298 journal listed? Frontiers in Public Health is a (very successful) competitor of our own journals. The Editor
299 in Chief, Paolo Vineis, is an independent highly appreciated leading scientist and colleague. I find it
300 indeed extremely offensive of JUFO to see the journal led by Paolo listed with the suspicious “gray area”
301 label of JUFO. The decision sheds dark light not on Frontiers in Public Health or its owner (Frontiers) but
302 indeed on the quality and working ethics of the JUFO committee.
303

304 As scientists we should abstain from decisions that lack any scientific evidence. Given our long-standing
305 experience with SpringerNature I realize that the questioning of Frontiers’ reputation has however
306 become a well-accepted fashion among conspiracy-like circles of scientists who prefer to trust their gut

307 feelings instead of the scientific evidence. In line with this observation stands the fact that until the very
308 end of our Springer contract, IJPH was never challenged or questioned for its choice of the publisher.
309

310 Until 2012, nobody ever raised the question why Springer would not share one single Swiss Franc of the
311 revenues they made with IJPH. It was my initiative to force Springer into a revenue-sharing contract
312 thereafter. I know that other society journals, published by hybrid publishers still accept the slavery model
313 of these publishers who omit the sharing of revenues with the owning society as long as they do not
314 stand up on their feet to request the sharing.

315 Our new Springer contract was still ill-defined and intransparent to an extent one would expect the
316 science community to raise flags. But again, the opposite is true. Everybody accepted the obscure fact
317 SSPH+ had to accept during the 7-year contract: SSPH+ would never know how large the shared
318 revenues will be at the end of the year. SSPH+ had zero options to monitor the income or to control those
319 payments as those were based on undisclosed algorithms to define revenues. Nobody questioned the
320 fact that Springer had only one interest as publisher of IJPH, all these years: namely to maximize their
321 own revenues.
322

323 Instead, since day 1 of our contract with Frontiers, the reputation discussion has become a prime
324 constant in the wider research community, despite the full independence of SSPH+ journals from
325 Frontiers and despite our inability to detect any “grey area” indicators applicable to Frontiers.
326

327 Of course, Frontiers is a private business with large benefits (else Frontiers could not fund educational
328 projects such as Frontiers for Young Minds or the 3 Planetary Prizes of 1 Mio Swiss Franc provided to
329 each of 3 finalists. However, given that academia accepts since many decades that extremely large tax-
330 money based revenues get channeled to the shareholders of mega-publishers, the main question we –
331 the scientists – should care about is the quality of the publications and journals. Instead of making any
332 contribution to this difficult task, the unfounded “grey area” proposal of JUFO distracts limited resources
333 to promote biased, false and unproductive “grey area” activism.
334

335 **Last but not least, it is not my role to “defend” (or defame) any publisher. All I can do is sharing**
336 **the long-standing experience made with different publishers. If JUFO is interested in endorsing**
337 **OA and open science, it is highly recommended to also take a less biased and closer look to the**
338 **roles and interests, conflicts, attitudes and actions of publishers, journals, editors and academic**
339 **committee members to establish evidence based policies that endorse high quality publishing**
340 **under fair and transparent conditions.**

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