



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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- Dr. Christopher Woodrow, Head Editorial Management Office at Swiss TPH

1 ANNEX to the SSPH+ request to abstain from downgrading the Swiss School of 2 Public Health journals as “grey publishing level 0” 3

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

21 In **YELLOW** are citations of the [news](#), last time accessed on 30.12.2024. My commentaries relate to the
22 field of health sciences as I cannot judge the issues in other fields. For those interested in further details,
23 feel free to watch my provocative Distinguished Lecture «Can we prevent the collapse of scientific
24 publishing? A wake-up call from a retiring species»

25 <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1NkVGC0JSj49sYwKCRvDqgKO3wvH4wMSJ/view>

26 delivered at the Epidemiology EEPE summer school in July 2024. The lecture shares various facts about
27 the publishing business mentioned below.
28

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

30 This is a classic element of the a narrative where challenges in the publishing domain get reduced to the
31 APC model, whereas the unethical subscription-based pay-wall and hybrid models remain unaddressed.
32 The JUFO text leaves the impression that the “gray area Level 0 label” to be restricted to journals with the
33 APC model? Thus all others, such as subscription based journals cannot fall into this “gray area Level 0”?
34 It is a very misleading and biased perspective on today’s publishing business – perverted long before the
35 emergence of APC models. The move to Open Science with OA as one of it corner stones is a strong
36 vision JUFO should unambiguously endorse. Apart from the niche of a few Diamond OA journals, the
37 APC model is currently the only viable model for successful Gold OA.
38

39 JUFO's mission is to encourage, monitor and make visible the quality and transparency of scientific 40 publishing.

41 The planned listing of SSPH+ journals (and many other journals) as “gray area publishing” is proof that
42 JUFO has no strategy nor any clear plan to assess and monitor quality of journals or to provide
43 transparency. See the above letter and the various comments following below.
44

45 To propose a random selection of journals as “grey area Level 0” and to invite the science community to
46 challenge the list in providing the rationale for alternative grades is an unacceptable and shameful
47 approach. It is the duty of the JUFO panel to make such assessments *prior to victimize a journal, thus,*
48 *the responsible editors and reviewers, as “grey area Level 0”.*
49

50 One of the most important changes in scientific publishing in Finland is the sharp increase in the number
51 of articles published especially in MDPI and Frontiers open access journals operating with APC fees
52 ([Hansen](#)). The scientific community’s key concern is, whether the costs of open access publishing
53 increases unreasonably, and whether the increase happens at the expense of a thorough quality
54 assessment.
55

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

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

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

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

94
 95 **The only solution for SSPH+ to escape the ill-defined quota system also enforced by Springer in**
 96 **IJPH was our move to Frontiers. Since 2021 the one and only reason to be rejected by IJPH and**
 97 **PHR editors is the scientific quality – i.e. a negative peer review – rather than quotas defined by**
 98 **the business model of the publisher.**
 99

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

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

118
 119 The deep addiction for Impact Factors and the “publish-or-perish” culture are invented, caused and
 120 endorsed by academia - not by the traditional nor the OA publishers! Academic leaders – not publishers
 121 or journals - force scientists to search for journals that accommodate the growing demand. Academic
 122 boards – not the publishers – decide to abuse tax money to cover outrageously high APC fees in the

123 range of 6000-10'000+ USD for publications (e.g. the Lancet and Nature brands). Without the support of
 124 academic boards and committees run by leading scientists, insane predatory behaviors of private
 125 publishers such as Elsevier would never be possible. Scientists – not publishers – decide to submit to
 126 fake predatory journals. Scientists, not publishers, might opt for the salami slicing of papers into several
 127 publications. Scientists, not publishers, decide to submit papers to more than one journal, simultaneously.
 128

129 In sum, academia fosters various manipulations prevalent in the publishing business that jeopardize the
 130 advancement of open science and open access publishing. Prior to use unqualified statements about the
 131 “sharp increase”, the JUFO steering committee should shed unbiased transparency on the natural growth
 132 of (good quality) science and provide criteria to define the quality of a journal instead of engaging in
 133 scoring and listing of “grey area” journals in the absence of any standardized assessments. Given the
 134 rather strong scientific record established by many journals of Frontiers (and MDPI), the “sharp increase”
 135 of its publications – particularly during the pandemic – is not surprising at all but a direct consequence of
 136 the manipulative attitudes of all the hybrid journal publishers that that comply with publication quota to
 137 protect their revenues. Even the enormous strain caused by the pandemic, where the global scientific
 138 community got the opportunity to focus on publishing, was by and large digested by the Gold OA
 139 publishers put in question by JUFO. Please be aware that the bashing on the largest Gold OA publishers
 140 – Frontiers and MDPI – results in essence in encouraging scientists to submit their work to highly
 141 overpriced hybrid and subscription journals. SSPH+ is heavily engaged to move its Gold OA journals into
 142 a Diamond/Platinum OA model to be free for authors and readers. However, Diamond publishing remains
 143 a very minor niche given that public funds is channeled to cover overpriced subscriptions and Gold OA
 144 APC fees instead of supporting independent journals to publish Diamond OA. Academia and academic
 145 committees such as the JUFO steering board – not the publishers – make those (biased!) funding
 146 decisions. Academia – not the private publishers – should come up with innovative plans to foster and
 147 fund Diamond publishing as a prime strategy to remove the various conflicts of interest inherent to
 148 subscription- based, hybrid, and APC-based Gold-OA publishing.
 149

150 JUFO should also not raise the vague question **whether the increase happens at the expense of a**
 151 **thorough quality assessment** but instead provide criteria to assess the quality of journals. This should be
 152 done prior to create obscure “grey area” listings.
 153

154 **MDPI and Frontiers journals are critically debated in the international scientific community.**
 155

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

165 The purely ecologic correlation analyses of Hansen et al ignore also the highly relevant distinction of
 166 journal owners versus publishers. Many prestigious journals – at least in the health field – are owned by
 167 not-for-profit societies (such as ours). In most of these cases, publishers have no influence on editorial
 168 decisions. Hansen et al – like the JUFO committee – also blinds the fact that the quality of journals (and
 169 special issues) does not depend on the publisher but on the model, role and work of the EiC, the editorial
 170 boards and the reviewers.
 171

172 Hansen et al is particularly out of touch of the real problems and strains in the current scientific publishing
 173 business in their mediocre assessment and discussion of the time needed for the peer review. The vast
 174 majority of journals and manuscripts suffer from far too long, redundant and repetitive peer reviews –
 175 including our own journals and indeed the journals owned by Frontiers. Instead of questioning the
 176 surprisingly narrow distribution of the rather fast review cycles seen in MDPI journals, science-oriented
 177 independent and unbiased editors would instead welcome constructive strategies to shorten the lengthy
 178 peer review and solutions to abate one of the underlying causes of far too long review cycles, namely the
 179 unprecedented [reviewer crisis](#). Meanwhile, 95% of scientists prefer to only publish in peer review journals
 180 but decline invitations to act as reviewers! This again is caused by the scientist – not the journals nor the
 181 publishers. Indeed, the latter have no other choice than sending floods of invitations and reminders to
 182 review to secure two reviewers!
 183

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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JUFO contradicts and ignores Nr 4 of its level 1 Criteria

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

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

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

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

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

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

As scientists we should abstain from decisions that lack any scientific evidence. Given our long-standing experience with SpringerNature I realize that the questioning of Frontiers’ reputation has however

307 become a well-accepted fashion among conspiracy-like circles of scientists who prefer to trust their gut
308 feelings instead of the scientific evidence. In line with this observation stands the fact that until the very
309 end of our Springer contract, IJPH was never challenged or questioned for its choice of the publisher.
310

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

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

323
324 Instead, since day 1 of our contract with Frontiers, the reputation discussion has become a prime
325 constant in the wider research community, despite the full independence of SSPH+ journals from
326 Frontiers and despite our inability to detect any “grey area” indicators applicable to Frontiers.
327

328 Of course, Frontiers is a private business with large benefits (else Frontiers could not fund educational
329 projects such as Frontiers for Young Minds or the 3 Planetary Prizes of 1 Mio Swiss Franc provided to
330 each of 3 finalists. However, given that academia accepts since many decades that extremely large tax-
331 money based revenues get channeled to the shareholders of mega-publishers, the main question we –
332 the scientists – should care about is the quality of the publications and journals. Instead of making any
333 contribution to this difficult task, the unfounded “grey area” proposal of JUFO distracts limited resources
334 to promote biased, false and unproductive “grey area” activism.
335

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

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