General Editor’s Good-bye

Dear Board Members, contributors, the loyal reviewers and the readers of the Women’s Health & Urban Life (WH & UL). It is with as much joy as a heavy heart that I am saying good-bye to all of you. My joy derives from the fact that I served as the founder and the general editor of this critical, innovative and uncompromisingly feminist journal since its inception. Indeed, since its 2002 debut, WH & UL has been a staunch advocate of all positive efforts in women’s health and a perpetual critic of the less than desirable customs, traditions, interventions that negatively impact the health and well-being of women and their children.

Since its 2002 unveiling, the WH & UL published papers from almost all parts of the world, and gave voice to women (and some male) scholars on topics that are otherwise rarely made the focus of inquiry in more ‘mainstream’ journals. I would like to add that the WH & UL managed to provide a unique arena for women’s research and inquiries without ever compromising the high standards we all aspire to in peer-reviewed, academic publishing. Through our commitment to ‘open access’ scholarship, and through our up-to-date free-access website, the WH & UL reached literally thousands of readers from literally all corners of the world. Our critical feminist stance and easy accessibility entrenched us as a trusted voice in the area of women’s health in parts of the developing world where access to new and critical information is often harnessed by exuberant user/subscription fees many ‘mainstream’ academic journals charge. I thank all the WH & UL Board members, my Co-editor Dr. Toba Bryant and of course, all our anonymous reviewers and authors for helping us to uphold our high standards. Despite the fact that the WH & UL is a critical rather than a ‘mainstream’ journal, we participated in journal funding competitions with all Canadian ‘mainstream’ journals, and received recognition of our quality and secured funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).

My heavy heart is due to the fact that the future of the WH & UL is not at all clear. This lack of clarity is not because of anything WH & UL did or did not do to ensure its longevity. Indeed, and as afore mentioned, the WH & UL has indeed been meticulous in its quality, innovation and in its global reach. In fact, the possibility of the demise that now threatens the WH & UL is because of an abrupt policy change in the SSHRC application criteria for funding that took place in 2010. In an effort to streamline its ‘catchment’ area, while at the same time, possibly to deal with its own governmental cutbacks in availability of funds, the SSHRC announced in 2010 that it no longer will fund any research, or journal that addresses ‘health’. To my knowledge, the SSHRC did not
ask for much input into its slash-and-burn approach in cutting all funding for all health-related research/publications. The SSHRC’s general, and to a large degree, quite misguided explanation of its abrupt policy change was to meekly claim that health research falls outside of social science. Many animated arguments to the contrary did nothing but fall on deaf SSHRC ears. My own e-letters to members of the executive board as well as to President Chad Gaffield did not procure any response. An introduction to one of the earlier WH & UL issues (XI(1), 2012) also fell on deaf SSHRC ears, although I personally mailed individual copies to the President and to two executive directors of the SSHRC.

Why is something like the SSHRC support so crucial, one might ask. Some—like the SSHRC decision-makers—might further ask “why can’t the health journals seek monetary support from medical or pharmaceutical establishments who have lots and lots more money than the social sciences?” The answers to such questions are simple, despite the fact that the SSHRC prefers to ignore or dismiss such simple answers. First, social sciences have an extremely important responsibility to serve as a watchdog over medical and pharmaceutical establishments whose goals may or may not coincide with the physical or the emotional well-being of the masses. Especially when the health of women is concerned, the divergence in the vested interests might get more serious. Social scientists have shown over and over the over-medicalization of women, especially in areas of sexual or reproductive health. The overuse of tranquilizers and estrogen-type hormones, the indiscriminate use of caesarian sections or mastectomies are just a few examples of the heavy-handed interventionism in women’s health.

Second, can critical social scientific enquiries preserve their critical nature if their existence comes to depend on funds they garner from medical establishments? Could there be competing vested interests in funding versus not funding journals whose main aim is to criticize some of the traditional biases in healthcare or healthcare delivery? Third, how can a critical journal such as the WH & UL preserve its global, free-for-all electronic exposure without some form of governmental support? To my knowledge, social and humanities journals are leading the open access trend while the medical and pharmaceutical journals and publications are still demanding high premiums for any type of access.

The bottom line is that there are serious, and not carefully thought out consequences of the SSHRC decision taken in 2010. One relates to the denial of the fact that issues about health are not only medical but also social, political, economic and gender/age/other-status related. The more direct impact on the WH & UL is either its demise or the unavoidable change in its nature and aims.
The first option, demise of the journal, will indeed be profoundly unfortunate. The WH & UL is much too important a journal to simply let go. The WH & UL has entered and has been successful in SSHRC’s own journal competitions, proving its academic worth time and time again. The WH & UL has worked with hundreds of authors, dozens of reviewers/researchers in its 12-year existence. The WH & UL has established a solid global readership reaching many thousands, from all parts of the world. The bottom line behind most of its success has been the security of its governmental funding through fair academic competition, which is now being abruptly withheld due to a one-sided SSHRC policy change.

An alternate form of existence is to find an affluent, already established publishing enterprise to subsume the WH & UL under its own brand. Indeed, there is not one but a few such establishments who are on the lookout for accomplished critical journals that are mortally in danger of extinction because of funding problems. Especially in an era where ‘printed’ materials are going in the wayside of dinosaurs, publication business is getting more and more monopolized in the hands of a mega-few. These mega-few publishers are still powerful enough to charge handsome fees to university libraries and thus, secure their existence. The mega-few are also in the position to cherry-pick amongst smaller journals and usurp them into their publication empires. Like all transactions between the powerful and the fragile, there is a price. Some of the ‘price’ for a small but critical journal to be engulfed by a much larger and much more powerful publication corporation is obvious: the subscription rates will go up—maybe even double or triple. Yet, the ‘price’ that worries me the most is not that blatant. I am worried about free-access, since none of the mega-publishers are keen on giving free-access to the information they control. The mega-publishers insure that only those universities that can afford large fees will subscribe to their journals, and only at exuberant costs. Too bad for our student readers who so far had access to the full contents of the WH & UL journal at a click of their mouse. Too bad for our scholarly peers from the developing parts of the world where exuberant subscriptions fees will block their access to freshly published materials. Yes, the WH & UL journal has a strong enough history which makes it a good candidate to be ‘cherry-picked’ by a mega-publisher, but this can only come through clamping down on its free-access and availability. Who knows, its critical stance on women’s health issues might also get blunted along the way.

I am leaving the general editorship of this incredible journal that I founded in 2001, and have been serving since 2002. Despite the vast amount of work it required, I can easily say that the WH & UL has been one of the peak experiences of my own long academic career. Dr. Toba Bryant is the incoming general editor, whom I like, respect and trust—in
equal measure. Although I have been able to pass on to Dr. Bryant a journal with a glowing past, I regret that I have not been able to secure a solid future for the WH & UL. In no way could I have foreseen an abrupt change in the SSHRC’s funding criteria that left health-related fields in social sciences high and dry. In these trying times for critical scholarship, Dr. Toba Bryant is the one who will usher the journal into its own future. I am afraid, the choices that are available to her are nowhere near entering an honest and honourable SSHRC competition. In the past, our success in the SSHRC competitions sustained the life of our journal, and gave its legitimacy. But then, the SSHRC pulled that life-support away from all health researchers. Although critical scholarship has always recognized its core dependence on governmental funding, it is unfortunate that the SSHRC seems to forget that part of its mandate has always been to support critical thinking and research in health.

Aysan Sev’er, General Editor
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