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A tunnel to the other side of the world: What sort of writing can contribute to social change?

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Journal articles are not widely read, so can academics cultivate their skills in genres which are more popular and persuasive? Can we ‘write differently’? This paper presents an account of a children's story aimed at engaging children and adults in understanding the relationship between inequality and the climate and ecological crises, and aimed at stimulating readers to engage in social change. The subtext of the children's story is a critique of mainstream political economy through using the concept of ‘cosmolocal’ production relying on ideas about the commons. We explore whether and how academics can convey these ideas effectively through different forms of publication, and we focus on comparing children's books and journal articles. Many academics would agree that they want to co-create a better future by addressing wealth inequality and environmental degradation through alternative economic and technological models. The question is whether journal articles help achieve that aim.

Keywords: commons; post-capitalism; cosmolocalism; academia; culture; writing; journals

‘Truth is a matter of the imagination.’

— Ursula Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, 1969

‘But the child never took to fairytales...

Enough now! We have to tell the children the truth.’

— Manolis Anagnostakis, *Ο Στόχος*, 1970

Introduction

The world is changing around us. Wealth inequality is increasing while humans and non-humans are facing an existential crisis. Many commentators and politicians appear to place their bets on technology that is yet to come to address the climate and ecological crises. For example, in their book *Why Can't We All Just Get Along? How Science Can Enable A More Cooperative Future* (2018), MIT scientists Christopher Fry and Henry Lieberman investigate the causes of wars, wealth inequality and other social problems. Their argument revolves around the prevalence of a competitive mindset within our institutions and businesses, which they claim hinders effective cooperation in solving these major issues. However, they provide a glimmer of hope by highlighting the potential of modern technology in tackling the root cause. They assert that competition arises from scarcity, and recent technological advancements, like 3D printing and artificial intelligence (AI), can eliminate widespread scarcity (see also Bastani 2020). Consequently, they envision a future where cooperation takes precedence in a post-scarcity world.

Engineering an account of the future in which high technology solves all our problems is fairly easy. It fits well with the dominant stories being told by corporations, governments and universities, all heavily invested in suggesting that the present age can continue. This world is mostly imagined in techno-capitalist terms because that's where the big money is, whether in research grants, intellectual property or profits. 'Catapults' accelerate 'innovation'; 'partnerships' and 'collaborations' focus on 'translational' research. Tragically, though, the hyperbolic language used to describe both means and ends effectively disguises that this is a continuation of the same forms of technology and organisation that got us into this mess in the first place. In this paper, we argue that we need futures that are not yoked to this narrow understanding of technology and instead in which different forms of social organisation help to produce a possible future on an increasingly lively planet (Parker 2024).

Many dominant stories promoting technology-mediated futures find their audiences through orthodox academic journals, the business press and the public relations of big tech companies. So, how can other accounts find an audience? Such alternative stories play a twofold role. First, they aim to better represent our current predicament, exposing uncomfortable truths often neglected in discussions about green growth and technological innovation (Weder et al. 2021). Second, they take up the challenge of communicating the urgency for radical change and possible pathways forward to wider audiences, not only those already convinced (Voci and Karmasin 2024). This paper presents such an attempt to write differently, for different audiences, and not just communicate with other academics.

Embracing our multiple identities as academics, authors, artists, activists, and parents, we created a picturebook accessible to very young children to communicate an aspect of current social and environmental injustices. The book was part of a project which explored

how to communicate post-capitalist ideas to wider publics and was supported by the P2P Lab, a collective of researchers and activists studying the intersection of open-source technologies, post-capitalism and the commons.¹ The P2P Lab has been attempting to communicate their ideas and findings beyond academia, to people of all ages from all over the world. They have experimented with different communication formats, such as short form video, but this paper presents the picturebook, an outcome of this experimentation, and discusses various aspects of its content, context and objectives.

We initially considered this book part of a necessary attempt to talk openly to children about the predicament their generation is destined to face and hint at a possible way out—a strategy that is premised on intergenerational solidarity. While children may lack a direct voice in shaping our present actions, adults have a responsibility to ensure that their interests are safeguarded (Benevento 2023). Our choices today will reverberate through their lives, defining the world they inherit and the possibilities they encounter. How, then, can we convey the complexities of our current reality to a younger generation? How can we engage them in a dialogue that sparks their imaginations, instils a sense of agency, and empowers them to participate in co-creating a more inclusive and sustainable tomorrow?

The book also aims to catch the attention of ‘all those grownups who, as children, died in the arms of compulsory education’ (Cullum 1971, n.p.) and have since become prone to the various forms of common sense and complacency of the adult world. The story in the book is straightforward, but messages are hidden within the text and pictures, waiting to be discovered, trigger questions, and motivate further exploration of future possibilities. Hence, we consider the book a crossover, or cross-writing, an attempt at targeting dual audiences (Beckett 1999; 2012; Knoepflmacher and Myers 1997).

¹ See <https://www.p2plab.gr>

Taking this cross-writing approach, intuitively and intentionally, was probably inevitable. That is because picturebooks for very young children ‘are designed to be read by adults to children, and thus, by adults *and* children’ (Bullen and Nichols 2011, 214). Also, ‘the first audience for any book that might be published is not children at all, but rather the adults who edit, publish, teach, and review the books’ (Enciso et al. 2010, 253). Adults must be attracted, persuaded and convinced for the books to be published, marketed and bought (Wall 1991; Stan 2000).

Our effort to reach the desired readership, however, stumbled upon some predictable obstacles, prompting us to consider the difficulties of telling stories about a topic that doesn’t sit well with dominant stories and traverses disciplines and genres. It seems to us that the experience of trying to publish the book has some lessons for academics who want their writing to contribute to social change but usually restrict themselves to communicating through academic journals. In presenting our attempt to communicate complex concepts differently, we must also necessarily discuss the obstacles that emerge from the relations between knowledge, publishing, and markets and which operate as filters that determine what is to be heard and what is not.

We first introduce our story, ‘A tunnel to the other side of the world’, accompanied by four draft illustrations courtesy of the artist Tonia Vita. Then, we reflect on the various layers of meaning (and feeling) derived from this children’s tale that touches upon ecological crisis, inequality, and post-capitalist social change. As an example, we introduce a form of socio-economic configuration premised on the commons and a local-global collaboration—‘cosmolocalism’.

Commons-based forms of organising are pivotal in post-capitalist discourses and play a crucial role in exploring post-growth organisations and alternative pathways for technology

(Pansera and Fressoli 2021). While the commons has been neglected in management and organisation studies, the concept is gradually attracting growing interest (Fournier 2013; Munro 2023; Murillo, Guinart, and Arenas 2024). The example of cosmolocalism is by no means the only way to think about what it will take to produce an alternative economy, but it allowed us to frame some of the ideas in our children's book.

The core question for this paper is how best to communicate the need for radical social change. To put it bluntly, is it better to write a children's book or a journal article? Which is more likely to result in changing beliefs and actions? The paper concludes by asserting the importance of hope and the possibility of alternative pathways, the light at the end of the tunnel, and how to show it to other people.

The story: A tunnel to the other side of the world

Zoe wants to play with her dad's phone. But her dad won't let her. "I'm busy," he says. "Go do some digging. Go and find some treasure. Put it in your bag and bring it back to me." He gives her a bucket and a spade and starts talking on his phone again.



Figure 1. Zoe and her father. Draft drawing, courtesy of Tonia Vita.

Zoe digs while her dad talks on his phone. You can find many treasures by digging!
Here is a worm that likes to live in the soil. Here is some rusty metal. Here is an old piece of pottery.



Figure 2. Zoe is digging. Draft drawing, courtesy of Tonia Vita.

Deeper still. Here are the roots of a big tree! “I will not hurt them because the tree drinks water and eats its food through its roots” thinks Zoe. She carries on digging. Her dad is still on the phone.

She gets to a part of the earth with big rocks that she has to dig out of the way, then finds two beautiful red stones. “I will carry them in my bag and start building a little red house with them”.

What a huge tunnel Zoe has made while her dad is still on the phone! “I will find what is hidden at the other end of the hole.” she says to him. But he is not listening.

She keeps digging, and digging, and digging. Then, suddenly, she sees light.

Her head pops out in a strange place on the other side of the world. The sun is burning hot, and the air smells dusty, but look how many children are digging! And here, the parents dig too.



Figure 3. Zoe meets Beno. Draft drawing, courtesy of Tonia Vita.

Zoe walks up to the child and asks: “What kind of treasures are you looking for?”

“Copper and cobalt” the child answers. “What games do you play with them?” Zoe asks. “We do not play games”, he says sadly. “We sell them to the grown-ups on the other side of the world.”

“What do grown-ups do with your copper and cobalt?”, Zoe asks. “They make phones” the child answers and goes back to his digging. The child has no time for games. He must dig in the sun so that grown-ups can talk on the phone.

“This isn’t fair” Zoe thinks “not fair at all!”. “What is your name?” she asks the child.



“Beno”, he says.

Figure 4. Zoe and Beno are setting up a plan. Draft drawing, courtesy of Tonia Vita.

Beno and Zoe sit together and laugh. Zoe shows him the red stones from her bag, and they come up with a great idea! He will stop looking for copper and cobalt and instead look for coloured stones too. They will share them through the tunnel.

They can share shovels and buckets too, and ideas. And then they will build wonderful houses with their friends at both ends of the tunnel.

Zoe says goodbye to Beno, promising to see him the next day. Then she goes back through the tunnel, to tell her dad what she has discovered.

Zoe pops her head out of the tunnel and sees that her dad isn’t on the phone anymore. “Where have you been Zoe?” he says, in a worried voice.

Zoe tells him about Beno, and her dad looks thoughtful. “After dinner, let’s go through the tunnel and talk to Beno about building wonderful red houses,” he says. And they do. And, for the rest of the day, her dad didn’t use his phone at all.

Genres and Audiences

We wanted our book to be a crossover picturebook, simultaneously addressing children and adults (Beckett 2012). Picturebooks have traditionally been considered a children’s genre, though contemporary illustrators and graphic novelists indeed challenge such assumptions. Picturebooks differ from illustrated books in that the pictures not only support the text but comprise an additional narrative such that the visual and textual narratives are intertwined and mutually interanimated (Bullen and Nichols 2011; Lewis 2001). In the case of our book, some pictures enrich the text visually; for example, when Zoe meets Beno (figure 3). Other pictures add layers of meaning, inviting further contemplation and opportunities for emotional engagement and conversation between the child and the adult. For example, in the image where Zoe talks with her father (figure 1), he appears headless, disengaged. The interplay between textual and visual narratives can offer a reading experience in which preliterate children read the pictures while the adult reads them the words. Beckett (1999; 2012) argues that picturebooks provide a unique opportunity for a collaborative, shared, and intergenerational reading experience, equally empowering children and adults more than any other narrative format.

This plural nature of picturebooks (Lewis 1990) encouraged us to incorporate aspects of our academic research within a fictional story to make it accessible to children and adults. Unlike narrower and drier scientific and knowledge-based approaches, we wanted to use a relatable and engaging communication medium (Cutter-Mackenzie and Rousell 2019;

Benevento 2023). Our aim was to produce impactful writing about pressing challenges to encourage consideration of alternatives and motivate transformational action (Lindgren Leavenworth and Manni, 2021; Wals and Corcoran 2012).

Addressing children, communicating the climate crisis, or the violence depriving Beno of his childhood requires a sense of responsibility and care (Cadden 2000). Although such topics may evoke negative emotions like fear, anxiety, and desperation, it seems to us and others that distressing ideas should not be bypassed but rather treated in a way that works for a child audience (Cadden 2000). Hence, instead of trying to ‘protect’ children (or ourselves) from the facts, our story explores the truth through Zoe’s adventure and sheds light on Beno’s heartbreaking reality.

The flexibility of crossover picturebooks also facilitated our experimentation with reaching out to wider academic and non-academic audiences. The creative process of making the book has been a hands-on experience of ‘writing differently’ (Grey and Sinclair 2006; Pullen et al. 2020), even to the extent of writing this academic article about it. This allowed us to temporarily escape from the ‘aesthetically flawed [...] dry, obscure, and clunky’ academic writing that marginalises other ways of being and knowing, reproducing certain Western, masculine, authorial scientific norms (Weatherall 2023, 515). Academic language is defined by long sentences, embedded subclauses and dense vocabulary, so we wished to experiment with what it might mean to write in simpler and more direct ways and not to neglect embodied experience in favour of abstraction and cognition (O’Shea 2019, Pullen et al. 2020). This means that we were forced to reconsider how we relate to our audiences, and to try and extend our readership beyond small self-selecting groups of scholars (Gatto 2023).

Through the story of Beno and Zoe, we tried to communicate some complex issues in a simple way, to write differently. The following section provides an academic account of the assumptions behind the story in the book.

Behind the story

Whenever we share the story of Zoe and Beno with kids, they bombard us with questions that seem obvious to them. Why must Beno gather minerals and not play with his friends? Why are grown-ups so obsessed with their phones (and work) instead of spending time with their children? Why don't Zoe's parents work with Beno's parents to solve their problems? And why don't they share resources when there are enough for everybody? Responding to these 'why' questions is complex, challenging the skills of a parent, an educator, a carer, or an academic who wants their work to have some sort of social impact.

Allegedly, mainstream economists can provide answers to all of these questions and supporting them are sophisticated mathematical models. Mainstream economics 'proves' that the present world is on track to raise living standards for all if markets are allowed to do their work (Reinert 2008). According to the dominant rationale, Beno and his compatriots in the Global South should continue extracting minerals for mutual global benefit. That is because abundant mineral resources and cheap labour in 'developing' countries are their comparative advantage. In this way, the role and future of children like Beno are predestined. Likewise, policymakers and politicians from the Global North 'prove' that it is in everyone's interest if the 'developed' countries have a comparative advantage in design. Hence, it makes sense that the rest of the world should deliver the raw materials necessary to materialise these designs. However, despite this logic, the wealth gap continues to grow, the democratic deficit persists, and climate and ecological catastrophes are looming.

Popular narratives such as ‘green growth’ (Perez 2019), ‘ecomodernism’ (Asafu-Adjaye et al. 2022), or ‘accelerationism’ (Williams and Srnicek 2013) place our hopes for addressing these problems on new technologies. ‘Smart’ and ‘seamless’ digital tools will optimise the effectiveness and efficiency of services, reduce resource consumption and CO2 emissions, increase productivity, and engage citizens more actively. Yet, these perspectives fail to recognise that technology extends beyond the physical artefact to encompass its entire lifecycle—spanning design, manufacturing, use, maintenance, and disposal—as well as the ownership and control of the knowledge surrounding it (MacKenzie and Wajcman, 1985; Giotitsas, 2019). More critically, all technologies are embedded with social interests, values, and human-nature relationships (Feenberg, 2002). Consequently, technological solutions alone cannot fully address all problems, particularly when disregarding this broader and intertwined complexity.

So how does all this relate to our children’s picturebook? The story unfolds around a mobile phone. We get introduced to Zoe when she asks her dad for his phone to play. But he urges her to play outside. He is about to make a call. Later on, Zoe discovers Beno’s world. That is where the raw materials needed to manufacture smartphones, like her dad’s, are extracted. Beno explains to Zoe why he is not playing like her instead of working, and what kinds of ‘treasures’ he is forced to unearth. Using the smartphone as a reference helped us signal two of the major problems of our times: environmental degradation and wealth inequality. The concentration of the production of these high-tech artefacts within the capitalist context significantly contributes to these problems.

Smartphones, and other high-tech artefacts (e.g., sensors, solar panels, EVs), require scarce metals and rare minerals. Such resources are often extracted under exploitative labour and environmental conditions in the Global South (Sovacool 2019). The Democratic

Republic of the Congo, perhaps Beno's homeland, is one of the world's most richly endowed countries in terms of mineral wealth. Within the narrative of comparative advantage, delivering copper, cobalt, tin, tantalum and lithium to industrialised countries is their opportunity within the global economy. Yet to produce, use, and recycle high-tech artefacts, energy is consumed, toxins are generated, and inhuman and precarious labour is frequently involved (Lange, Pohl and Santarius 2020; Sovacool et al. 2020). As with the resource transfers (mineral, vegetable and human) that took place during the hundreds of years of European imperialism, it seems that digital capitalism is similarly predicated on mining in the Global South to manufacture technologies that will be used primarily in the Global North. The purchase of a finished product effaces how these artefacts were designed, manufactured, and transported (often from one side of the world to the other) or how these artefacts will be disposed of (Hornborg 2016). 'Our' technologies often exist at the expense of other humans and ecosystems elsewhere in the globe (Fuchs and Horak 2008).

Even 'efficiency improvements' often lead to an absolute increase in consumption due to lower prices per unit and a subsequent rise in demand. For example, the invention of more efficient steam engines allowed for cheaper transportation, which catalysed the Industrial Revolution. This did not reduce the rate of fossil fuel use but increased it (Alcott 2005). When more efficient machines use less energy to produce and consume, they cost less, and thus, people tend to use them more.

One of the lessons of capitalism is that people tend to consume more when they can (Hickel and Kallis 2020; Kallis et al. 2018). The economic and political demand to grow the Gross Domestic Product values such behaviour because the bigger the economy, the better it is. But GDP is a particular metric that values certain behaviours, such as spending, and ignores others, such as self-provisioning, sharing, non-monetary exchange, volunteering, and

so on. Calculations about the ‘efficiency’ of technology rely on ignoring wider senses of value. Would these technologies look so attractive if one considered the true cost of Beno’s labour and the destruction of Beno’s local ecosystem needed to produce them in the first place? These are political choices involving antagonisms and unequal power relations (Hickel and Kallis 2020; Kallis et al. 2018), not inevitable outcomes of technological change.

The prevalent understanding of technology, as expressed by the green growth or ecomodernist narratives, is basically a reproduction of the same global social relations that have dominated since the beginnings of European imperialism. Modern technology is historically associated with various forms of colonial domination (Barca 2020; Paulson 2024). Since international business is still predicated on similar relations between Global North and Global South, we might assume that Zoe is destined to remain unaware of how her smartphone was produced, and Beno is left with no choice but to sacrifice his childhood.

Dominant forms of organisation and exchange shape our behaviour. How we produce, what we discuss and dream, how we raise and teach our children, and how we relate and fall in love, all seem to take place in the shadow of capitalism. Communicating alternative futures is imperative. An alternative pathway unfolds in the latter part of Zoe and Beno’s story and is presented next.

Towards alternatives

Towards the end, our story provides a glimpse of hope. Beno and Zoe sit together and laugh. However, they do not ignore the injustices surrounding Beno’s reality. Instead, they decide to act upon it. Their idea is simple: from now on, they shall begin to meet, share their tools, ideas, and emotions, and make something together. Upon her return, Zoe tells her father what

she has discovered. Her dad takes a moment to digest her adventure and dedicates the rest of the day to his daughter.

Simple or not, their idea also hints at an alternative political economy. There are many terms and metaphors for a different economy—community economies, doughnut economics, the wellbeing economy, anarchism, the economy for the common good and so on (Parker et al. 2014). The one we hinted at in our picturebook was primarily based on ideas about the commons. The commons here is defined as social systems by which communities manage shared resources and produce goods cooperatively, prioritising socio-ecological well-being rather than profit maximisation (Bollier and Helfrich 2019; Ostrom 1990).

Zoe and Beno decide to create and maintain a commons. They agree to retain the ‘tunnel’ of communication connecting the two sides of the world. They will exchange some means of production (such as knowledge and inspiration) and build their imagined stone houses locally, on-demand, with the help of friends, sharing tools (shovels and buckets) and labour. They will self-organise and cooperate to achieve their goal. They do not think of transferring scarce resources from one side to the other. Zoe did not ask Beno to do the dirty work of extracting raw materials (in the Global South) while she designed shiny stone buildings (in the Global North). Nor did she ask Beno to build them for her. Their agreement challenges the assumptions of our present global trade system, proposing something else that seems fair and makes more sense to them.

Zoe’s and Beno’s future collaboration could be said to demonstrate an emerging configuration for production that one of us has elsewhere called ‘cosmolocal’ (Kostakis, Niaros, and Giotitsas 2023). Cosmolocal production integrates global knowledge exchange with localised manufacturing. Under the cosmolocal configuration, local communities are enabled to design artefacts (like smartphones or buildings) leveraging a global pool of

knowledge resources (e.g., design files, skills, good practices, know-how) which is openly accessible through the Internet as digital commons (Kostakis, Niaros, and Giotitsas 2023). In turn, participants can enrich the digital commons with their own contributions. Within this commons, diverse ideologies and practices converge, forming what Gibson-Graham (2002, 52) refers to as ‘communities of difference.’ Physical production occurs locally in shared infrastructures, like makerspaces and fab labs, employing cooperative practices, and is ideally aligned with participant-defined value systems and local biophysical conditions (Kostakis, Niaros, and Giotitsas 2023). The simultaneous local-global orientation of cosmological production empowers local autonomy, sufficiency and diversity while fostering a sense of global common benefit (Schismenos, Niaros, and Lemos 2020).

A primary goal of cosmological production is to reduce material and energy footprints by minimising the negative impact on other ecosystems (Manzini 2015; Kostakis et al. 2018). It also seeks to reduce dependence on global value chains and standardised, market-available technologies. Instead, cosmological production promotes designing durable, repairable, affordable and context-appropriate technologies tailored (or adaptable) to regional needs, capacities, available resources, and cultural specificities (Kostakis and Tsiouris 2024; Priavolou et al. 2022). Zoe and her friends may build houses with red stones, while Beno and his friends, on the other side of the tunnel, may build different houses with yellow stones. It’s up to them to decide, considering their needs and local context.

There are many initiatives, mainly from the Global North, which exemplify cosmological production, such as L’Atelier Paysan (agricultural machinery), RepRap (3D printers), WindEmpowerment (renewables), WikiHouse (buildings), LibreSpace (nano-satellites), and OpenBionics (robotic and bionic devices). Cosmological initiatives foster ecosystems of small-scale, locally-oriented communities while building global collaborative

networks. These networks facilitate the expansion of cosmological projects by disseminating and exchanging knowledge, solutions, ideas, and experience (Kostakis, Lemos, and Kouvara 2024). They also comprise the grounds for social action to address global challenges beyond temporary fixes and efficiency improvements collectively.

Unlike the corporate-driven approach of developing technologies first and finding applications (and markets) later, ignoring the urgency and complexity of today's challenges, cosmological initiatives go beyond simply producing technological solutions. Instead, they start with a broader vision for sustainable and equitable futures and demonstrate how society-driven production can contribute to reaching this aspiration (Kouvara, forthcoming). Through the commons-based organisation, these initiatives enable hands-on involvement in crafting and manufacturing technologies while encouraging active participation in discussions and decision-making processes. This approach cultivates community awareness of current crises and broader challenges that extend beyond the local scale. Consequently, while delivering tangible outcomes to address specific local needs, often neglected by one-size-fits-all solutions, cosmological initiatives also engage in political advocacy on global issues, driving transformative change.

The adoption of a cosmological production paradigm holds the potential to create a more inclusive and sustainable global political economy premised on the core principles of the commons, like solidarity and care, ecological stability and cultural diversity, openness, reciprocity and trust, as we hope Zoe and Beno's story suggests. Cosmological production proposes alternatives to the dominant overproduction and excessive consumption patterns by enhancing local control, relying on human creative capabilities and cooperation to produce and maintain useful artefacts, and the sense of belonging through the creation of alliances via commoning. However, it is not without its tensions and contradictions. Several challenges

remain unresolved, such as dependence on energy-intensive digital infrastructures, limitations in licensing and standardisation of open-source solutions, and limited institutional support for international collaboration (Costanza-Chock 2020; Kostakis 2019).

Nevertheless, it seems to us that a cosmological framework could potentially act as a catalyst for radical change, bridging diverse local initiatives to co-create a low carbon, high inclusion, high democracy economy, and ultimately practice an alternative paradigm. So, how can we communicate these ideas more widely?

Academic audiences

This paper has operated at what seem like two very different registers. First, we presented the backstory of creating a crossover picturebook intended to communicate some complex issues in simple ways. Then, we provided an academic account of the assumptions within and behind the story, communicating some complex issues in complex ways. In this section, we want to think about the relation between these two registers and the modes of dissemination in each case.

So far, we have yet to find a publisher for our book. One major publisher from the USA wrote to us that our tale does not offer ‘the inspiring, hands-on scientific focus’ they are drawn to. This publisher seeks stories to inspire young people and perhaps considers that stories based on social science might not be inspirational. Our inability to get this book published may mean that we had not written a book that was understood by commissioning editors to have a market. It might also be that we hadn’t approached the right publishers or approached them at the wrong time or in the wrong way. As with any form of cultural dissemination, there are explicit and implicit rules, and we are not experienced in them, having never written a children’s book before or having an agent who is. Publishers are

almost always commercial entities, and they require that the products they sell make them money to cover their costs and hopefully make a profit too. If they decided that our book would lose them money, they would be unlikely to agree to publish unless there was some subsidy or other commercial opportunity.

There are, of course, parallels here in terms of the inclusion of the text for a children's book in an academic paper for a journal. Academic journals have their own explicit and implicit rules too, and they are clearly rather different from those that apply to children's books. The spread of printing and literacy in Europe in the 17th century gave rise to a series of different forms of publication, each defined by who was the writer and who was the audience, how often it was published, as well as its physical characteristics and cost. The novel, pamphlet, chapbook, comic, newspaper, magazine and journal, were all attempts to sell words on paper to certain readers. This was true for 'academics' as well, with the first journals, *Journal des Sçavans in France* and the London based *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, both beginning in 1665.

The *Philosophical Transactions, Giving some Account of the present Undertakings, Studies, and Labours of the Ingenious in many considerable parts of the World*, was sold monthly at the price of one shilling. It was never much of a financial success at the time, but it did begin to construct the idea of a form of collective agreement about the importance of the provenance of ideas, their authorship and timing, as well as the beginnings of peer review. This latter element enabled the journal to present itself as a trusted serial publication because of the warrant provided by an editorial committee. *Transactions* borrowed the legitimacy of a social network of gentlemen in order to distinguish the reports of experiments, observations, or journeys published within its pages from fantastical claims made in other places, whether public houses or broadsheets (Csiszar 2018; Fyfe et al. 2022).

The gradual growth of the journal form from the 18th century onwards reflected the expansion of the professions—particularly medicine—as well as the development of learned societies, usually specialising in the natural sciences. Most were published by professional organisations and paid for by their subscriptions because it was rare that they found a more general market and could develop a wider audience such that they could sell alongside more commercial magazines in newsagents. Journals were almost always, with the exception of *Nature* and *Science*, small circulation, highly specialist, and largely unconcerned with growing a readership since their readers were already guaranteed by the profession or association.

By the late 20th century, academic publishers had begun to develop their own journals or provide the organisational and digital infrastructure for academics to do so. The reason Taylor and Francis (T&F), who publish *Culture and Organization*, and lots of other academic publishers, can afford these very specialist and small circulation journals is because their income primarily comes from higher education library budgets (Harvie et al. 2012). T&F currently publish around 2700 journals², and are owned by Informa, an information corporation with a revenue of £3.2 billion in 2023³. In terms of journals, they are not really operating in the same sort of market as children’s book publishers at all but are effectively acting as paid publishers, extracting value without needing to engage in marketing and distribution. In the same way that a firm might be employed to produce an ‘in house’ magazine for a company, costs are covered, plus T&F’s profits, and it doesn’t matter whether anyone actually reads it.

² <https://taylorandfrancis.com/journals/>, accessed July 2023.

³ <https://www.informa.com/investors/annual-report/>, accessed May 2024

Academic journals are published as a signal for universities and academics that a particular activity has been carried out, as well as a source of data that informs institutional rankings, appointments, promotions and so on. Many journals are not primarily concerned with cultivating readers. Indeed, it is often claimed that many journal articles are barely read (Prichard 2013), but this doesn't mean that publishing in them has been unsuccessful. When an article such as this one is published, the number of readers doesn't matter much, or even whether its ideas can be claimed to have any influence. The metadata will be scraped onto commercial websites, social media mentions will be counted and tabulated by geography and demography, and citations will be counted and fed into the databases that produce the impact factor of the journal, or one of the many other content and data aggregation platforms. The data will find its way into peer review metrics and automated university research management systems. It will also, of course, be inserted into a CV, submitted for annual reviews, job and grant applications. The article plays its function by being published, by communicating within the network of intermediaries, institutions and academics that valued activity is taking place. It's a sort of simulation of a market in writers and readers, in which publication isn't a consequence of an editor's assessment of an audience's enthusiasm, but of the extent to which a submission is agreed to be sufficiently similar to other submissions, to 'join a conversation', however muted and episodic. Once published, data about the publication is the signal that produces the information that matters (Parker 2023).

The contemporary academic journal is certainly a medium of communication, but not in the way that many people might imagine. If we set 'content' aside, then publication in *Culture and Organization* (for example) communicates activity within an academic disciplinary network, showing who is active and who is not, and information about that activity is then collected, tabulated and monetised by all of the actors within the network—

academics, research administrators and managers, state policy makers, editors, publishing executives, professional associations, social media aggregators and so on. It doesn't matter much what is actually written, but where it has been published.

The irony of this comparison of children's books and academic journals is that we can only conclude that the children's book is likely to reach a wider and more diverse audience than an academic journal article. If it is read much, this article will be read by a small and specialist set of academics who work in universities and are likely to already be interested and knowledgeable concerning the sort of topics that *Culture and Organization* publishes on. This is the equivalent of preaching to the choir, that is to say, trying to persuade people who already agree with you. The readers of this piece are probably already interested in broadly left, green, feminist and socialist politics, and employed in the English speaking global university complex, probably in business schools, and hence on the right side of the paywalls which fund the journal. After all, most people don't even have access to the journal. So if we really want to communicate about social change, why don't we write a 'children's' book instead?

Writing and Audiences

We could decide that academic journals don't matter, but that would be wrong. *Culture and Organization* and the thousands of other journals that T&F, SAGE, Wiley, Elsevier, Springer, Emerald, and others do serve a function for academics and their managers. However, if we imagine that they provide wider audiences, we are largely mistaken. Not only are they mostly publishing behind paywalls, but their dense vocabulary and sentence structure, references and endnotes, largely standardised design and absence of illustrations show that they are not concerned with cultivating audiences. They instead assume particular readers, defining

academic sub-disciplines, concerns and styles in the journal statement, and using metaphors like ‘joining the conversation’, ‘the literature’ and ‘the readership of this journal’ to ensure that the boundaries of any particular journal readership are reinforced. As editors will often remind you, in order to get into the journal, as an author or reader, you have to already be able to write as if you were a member of the club.

Compare this to the children’s picturebook, and in some sense, it represents the very opposite of the academic journal. It is a verbal text which is intended to be read as easily as possible with simple and attractive vocabulary and sentence structure; and a visual text which can even be read by pre-literate children, and complements the verbal narrative while offering additional layers of meaning. Both ‘texts’ are also usually self-contained, without making reference to any other text, and the design, font, illustrations, price, size, paper architecture and marketing will be optimised to ensure that as many copies as possible sell. These books are designed to find an audience, and their success depends almost entirely on whether they find readers. A children’s story not read by children—and bought by parents and libraries—would have been a waste of paper and ink, a loss of money and a failure to communicate.

The question for us here is not necessarily whether academics should write children’s stories *instead of* journal articles, but what other forms of dissemination might also be able to communicate the urgency and importance of ideas about social change. Between the children’s book and the academic journal, there are many ways of thinking about how ideas might be introduced into culture, at least partly through the medium of text⁴. Consider teenage and adult fiction; popular trade books on science, business and economics; politics, economics and technology magazines of many kinds; comic books; YouTube and TikTok

⁴ Which is to set aside, for the purposes of this paper, film, documentary, visual art, music, street art, dance, performance art and so on.

videos; plays; board games; open access educational websites; blogs; journalism, and so on⁵.

Of course, academics are not necessarily skilled or trained in these other ways of thinking about how to communicate by text, but all these modes are available to them. Why, then, imagine that academics can only communicate through journals?

Some readers might respond by suggesting that this is their skill, their vocation, and hence that they should concentrate on being effective within university based teaching, research, and writing. That is a reasonable response, but it does mean that they are unlikely to see their ideas and concerns enter culture more widely, and hence any political aspirations they may have for their ideas are unlikely to be fulfilled. This is a particular problem for any journal, like this one, that mentions the word ‘critical’ in its ‘aims and scope’ statement. Being ‘critical’ implies some sort of commitment to working towards a state of affairs in which the criticism has been addressed, which suggests that widening the audience is a political imperative that should be backed up by a strategy. Not to do so would be hypocritical or, at the very least, politically naïve.

Without some sort of idea about how these ideas might find wider dissemination and become sustained practices which address the injustices identified, it is easy to see why many people who are not involved in the academic sign system would regard publishing in this journal as no more than a gesture, a virtue signal with no likely effects (Parker 2023). This impulse led us to write this children’s story in the first place. We shared a sense that addressing a much wider field of cultural production was necessary so that our political concerns could find audiences.

⁵ See, for example, the materials generated by The Other School, a project funded by the P2P Lab and Tallinn University of Technology. <https://theotherschool.art/>

With the book unpublished, it means that we have yet to achieve what we desired and are instead (ironically) writing another journal article. Nonetheless, we do not consider our time to have been wasted. Making the story and writing an article about it has been an opportunity to think and practice across genres in some unfamiliar and often personally challenging ways (Grafström and Jonsson 2019). Our collaborative creative process allowed us to explore how to communicate complex concepts—in this case, cosmologicalism and the commons—through two different genres. We have tried to think and practice ‘writing differently’ rather than merely writing about it (Pullen et al 2020). We don’t want to suggest that academics should not publish in academic journals or to suggest that *only* other ways (such as making crossover picturebooks and writing children’s stories) are effective for finding audiences. Celebrating one approach as superior will unnecessarily limit the range of available tools that we have at our disposal.

Our main concern is to stimulate thought about what we can do with the tools and mediums closer to our skills, vocation and self-expression to raise awareness about alternatives such as cosmologicalism and the wide variety of proposals for an alternative economy. We are at a point where no more time is left to dedicate ourselves solely to critical debates and must instead engage in ‘writing difference’ into the world (O’Shea 2019) aimed at catalysing action. Weatherall (2023, 515) suggests this could mean a deeper exploration of ‘how a different, more inclusive, politics and ethics, could be developed and shared through academic writing’ to provoke transformative change. We would like to think that our picturebook—aimed at children and adults, academics and laypeople—is just such a subversive text. We have disguised it as a children’s book but intend it to convey some radical political provocations (Beckett 1999, xvi).

Conclusions

Some seek solace in the promise of future technologies to untangle our troubles, but we believe this disregards the potential dangers and unintended repercussions that technology may afford. Acknowledging that a sustainable and just world cannot be attained through technological advancements alone is imperative. Instead, we must explore alternative forms of social organisation and value creation, placing localisation, collaboration, sharing, and solidarity at the forefront. This paper presented such an alternative by discussing the concept of ‘cosmolocalism’ as a pertinent example of the evolving discourse on post-growth organisation, production and technology development.

To effectively convey the urgency of social change, we have considered questions of genre, style, and readership when communicating with different audiences. While valuable within academia, academic journals often remain inaccessible due to barriers like paywalls and complex language. In contrast, other more creative formats, like crossover picturebooks, can simultaneously be accessible to different readers, from very young children to adults, academics or not. This paper presented an example of such a book. Still, there are numerous other media of communication—such as fiction, trade books, magazines, plays, games, videos, and so on—which can serve as channels to reach wider audiences in the pursuit of meaningful transformation.

To effectively confront the challenges we face, it is insufficient to remain confined to writing in self-referential academic circles, speaking to each other through journals behind paywalls. For academics who care about their ideas contributing to social transformation, embracing alternative modes of communication is essential for connecting academia with society, encouraging different understandings and engagement with ideas about social and environmental problems which are currently marginalised by the dominant narratives. If we

claim to be critical, then we need to learn how to write for audiences who don't yet agree with us. Zoe and Beno deserve no less.

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