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Reassembling Scholarly Communications

Histories, Infrastructures, and Global Politics of Open Access

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2 Scholarly Communications and Social Justice

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The Open Access Movement has disrupted academic publishing, convincing academics and policy makers that research should be published in venues without paywall barriers. Academic institutions across the globe, including Harvard University and the University of Nairobi, have passed open-access policies that require faculty to make their work openly accessible, whether or not they are directed to do so by funding agencies. National governments in the United States, Japan, Argentina, and elsewhere have used legislation and regulatory policies to mandate that taxpayer-funded research be made publicly accessible through open-access publication. Influential nongovernment and private agencies—such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, the Gates Foundation, and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation—have followed. For many, the moral argument for this is straightforward: important and useful research, like education itself, is a public good to which everyone should have access, particularly when it is paid for with public money.¹

This fundamental social justice message of the Open Access Movement—that knowledge is a public good—connects the field of scholarly publishing to other social justice concerns. Yet, the universal impact of open access cannot simply be assumed or asserted. Access does not necessarily mean equality, and sometimes does not even mean equality of access. In the words of Safiya Noble, “the gatekeeping function of publishing is fundamental to issues of social justice ... the classification and dissemination of knowledge has never been a neutral project, and is often working in a broader context of nation-building, and to a larger degree, cultural domination. Knowledge and its dissemination are social constructs, with a variety of attendant values that are privileged.”²

Academic publishing, or scholarly communication as it is now called, finds its home and values in academic institutions that reflect and reinforce

colonialist structures of power. These systems must themselves be transformed if open access is to make good on its promise as a project of justice and equity.

Rooted in Colonial Privilege

In the United States, works authored by federal government employees are in the public domain, but the idea that government-funded research should be open to the public is relatively new. Western scholarly publishing began as the correspondence of gentlemen who had the leisure and wealth to indulge their intellectual curiosities, whose letters evolved into the journals and monographs that are now seen as traditional and inevitable. In order to access academic newsletters and journals, scholars paid membership fees to scholarly societies or subscribed to lending libraries, as Aileen Fyfe and Stuart Lawson explore further in this volume.

As Western colonialism expanded, so did universities and their presses. Oxford University Press is a clear example of how knowledge production and dissemination emerged as an aspect of the colonial project. According to its website, "Oxford University Press is the world's largest university press with the widest global presence," an acclamation that is consonant with British plans to govern the globe. Further, the Press describes its growth in alignment with conquest: "from the late 1800s OUP began to expand significantly, opening the first overseas OUP office in New York in 1896. Other international branches followed, including Canada (1904), Australia (1908), India (1912), Southern Africa (1914)."³ These branches were all built in places where the British Empire had established a strong colonial foothold. The claim that the Oxford University Press is the largest university press in the world may well be because the sun never set on the British Empire.

Similarly, Elsevier's success as the largest academic publisher in the world can be correlated with the success of the Dutch Empire. In addition, Elsevier's parent company, Reed Elsevier, was involved in the arms trade through conference services until outrage from its medical publishing clients forced divestiture in 2007.⁴ It is no coincidence that the largest, most lucrative, and most influential academic publishers are headquartered in the Global North (Springer in Germany, Wiley in the United States). The power to shape scholarly communications on a global scale—facilitated by the legacy of colonial extraction and the imposition of systems and knowledge from

those in power—continues to this day. Regardless of the subject matter, the academic publishing system, structured and controlled by commercial and university presses headquartered in Europe and North America, has produced a scholarly record dominated by scholarship from the Global North.

For example, a 2013 study of economics papers found that only 1.5 percent of economics articles in top-tier journal articles were about countries other than the United States, while only about three papers about the poorest 20 countries were published every two years.⁵ While many point to the impact of the digital divide, contributions to the scholarly record from scholars in the Global South are hampered by more than unequal access to digital technologies.⁶ Systemic obstacles include the perceived importance of global and local knowledge, language, and negative perceptions of research from the Global South, as covered by Packer, Babini, and others in this volume.

When selecting research topics, scholars from South America, Africa, and Asia often have to choose between focusing their research on a topic of local interest or choosing topics that are more likely to be published in the top journals in their field.⁷ Journals with high impact factors have editorial boards composed primarily of researchers in North America and Western Europe, which means the scope of these journals is evaluated by the criteria of the Global North. When scholars from other parts of the world choose to research topics of local importance, whether poverty, tropical diseases, or local folklore, they risk relegation to the periphery of the scholarly record. Richard Horton, an editor of medical journal *The Lancet*, noted that “we editors seek a global status for our journals, but we shut out the experiences and practices of those living in poverty by our (unconscious) neglect. One group is advantaged while the other is marginalized.”⁸ The marginalization of non-Western topics spans disciplines. Francis Nyamnjoh, former head of the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa, pointed out that “in the social sciences, where objectivity is often distorted by obvious or subtle ideology, African scholars face a critical choice between sacrificing relevance for recognition, or recognition for relevance.”⁹ These choices for publication relevance have real impact on lives. Jean-Claude Guédon and Alain Loute have pointed out that Zika was first discovered in 1947 but largely ignored by those outside the equatorial belt—including scholarly publications—until it threatened the United States in 2015–2016.¹⁰

Researchers also have to make a choice between writing in a language that will be accepted by journals published in the Global North or using

their local language. Because English is the *lingua franca* of research, scholars must produce scholarship in English if they wish to be published in the “top” international journals. Portuguese scholars Vieira Santos and Nunes da Silva describe the power held by English-fluent scholars, writing that “researchers and reviewers from core Anglophone countries are in a position to dictate parameters to their less-privileged ‘peers,’ thus imposing not only standard research criteria, but also standard genre models, writing parameters, and publishing guidelines.”¹¹ Ghanaian folklore scholar Kwesi Yankah shared a similar perspective, noting that “African scholars have lamented the marginalization of their manuscripts by Western publishers, who complain of ‘intrusive’ African vocabularies in titles and texts, intrusive because they are not mainstream languages [and therefore] could pose problems for marketing and smooth reading.”¹² Lack of English fluency can also shape a reviewer’s perception of submissions, and may be used as a shortcut to judge the overall quality of the paper. As Yankah continues, “Other times, manuscripts and contributions have been rejected for being rather ‘descriptive,’ ‘too data-oriented,’ ‘lacking theoretical grounding,’ or ‘not in tune with global jargon and metadiscourse.’”¹³ The reliance on Western academic English language and its norms excludes valuable content that does not fit its container, and shapes what counts as legitimate research, from the questions that can be asked to how they can be answered.

Scholarship from the Global South is too readily dismissed by researchers in the Global North, due to a publishing system whose standards of quality have been developed for academics in the Global North. Jeffrey Beall, who until recently maintained a list of publishers and journals he considers predatory, has been criticized for unfairly labeling publishers from developing countries predatory.¹⁴ In 2015, Beall called the Latin American publisher SciELO a “publication favela.”¹⁵ Many commentators called out the cultural bias implicit in his use of the term “favela,” stressing the importance of local and regional publishers and the indexing of SciELO in Web of Science and Scopus.¹⁶ In using the term “predatory publishers” to describe publishers in the Global South, Beall tainted the publishers with a conceit of ill-intent, foreclosing the possibility of developmental or capacity issues, rather than examining the problematic capitalist infrastructure of traditional commercial publishing that asks scholars to give away their intellectual property and to pay for the privilege.¹⁷ His inconsistent, and at times factually incorrect, criteria revealed the fallacy of having a checklist that failed to consider context, causing “irreversible reputational damage

to authors, editors and publishers. ... [Blacklists] can stigmatize researchers by being associated with them and can be used in a discriminatory manner."¹⁸ The fallout from Beall's blacklist goes on as the academic community continues to refer to its principles and conclusions to educate and make decisions on the legitimacy of publications.

The importance of a more nuanced and contextual approach to publication, as well as an understanding of access to the means of production rather than simply the output, cannot be overstated. For example, the publication of sustainable journals that meet the standards established by Northern scholars requires an understanding of Northern scholarly publishing, and a pool of scholars who have the time and resources to volunteer to serve on editorial boards and as peer reviewers, luxuries that are in short supply in many parts of the Americas, Asia, and Africa. An understanding of Northern scholarly publishing is also difficult for those left out of the process entirely—a study by Publons reported that the majority of peer reviewers are overwhelmingly from the United States.¹⁹ As Moore et al. describe, these exclusions are amplified in the context of contemporary neoliberal commitments to “excellence” that reify peer review rather than making room for other possible norms of quality.²⁰ Western frameworks for academic publishing, however, do not preclude the value of scholarship. The old adage “don't judge a book by its cover” takes on new meaning on the internet, where physical containers and formats have even less relevance and content is—or rather should be—king.

Replicating Representation: Race, Ethnicity, and Gender

In addition to geographical and linguistic biases, several studies have shown troubling gender gaps in publishing output. Studies have examined the JSTOR corpus,²¹ Web of Science,²² and Scopus and Science Direct²³ to find that, although gender representation has improved in the last 20 years to include more women across all areas of study, authorship is still shockingly imbalanced, particularly for single and lead-authored publications.

Women are even underrepresented in the peer review process: a recent study by Lerback and Hanson examined the journals from the American Geophysical Union (AGU), the largest publisher of Earth and space science, and showed that authors and editors suggest women as reviewers less often.²⁴ While this may be unsurprising in contemporary scholarly

publishing, historians have demonstrated that this has not always been the case, and therefore does not have to be.²⁵ The AGU has since made an effort to include more women in its reviewer pool, which has resulted in an increase in female-authored papers.

While editors may be aware of the gender gap in authorship and peer review, it is important to point out that this imbalance exists within the scholarly publishing industry as well.²⁶ It has been pointed out that publishing professionals are 60 percent female, but at the highest levels women represent less than a third of CEOs and fewer than one in five board chairs.²⁷ There is also a gender pay gap across the industry, as reported in the UK in 2018.²⁸ This is attributed to the differing roles men and women play in publishing institutions, but it also reinforces the reality that systemic injustices exist in publishing, too.

It is clear that gender biases exist at every level of publishing, alongside other biases in representation, including race, ethnicity, class, language, national origin, and ability. The academic publishing industry is, to put it bluntly, painfully white,²⁹ much like the rest of the publishing industry.³⁰ Unfortunately, ethnicity in authorship is difficult to disambiguate, but the Cooperative Children's Book Center at the University of Wisconsin–Madison has been keeping track of authorship since 1985, when they found that only 18 books were authored by African Americans.³¹ That number has since risen to 122 books authored by African Americans, which comes nowhere near to representing the percentage of African American children in the United States. It is not difficult to see a correlation between the lack of representation in editorial voices and the lack of representation in authorship, for both mainstream and scholarly publishing, particularly when there are concrete examples of race-based missteps in peer review and publication.³²

As Inefuku and Roh have argued, "If the editorial board, representing the master narrative, selects reviewers who from their perspective are qualified, the results are likely to reflect the same perspectives. This result is even more likely when one considers that the pool from which editorial board members and peer reviewers are drawn consists of tenured and tenure-track professors, who are, as mentioned previously, 84 percent white."³³ These demographics and the resulting biases should be more directly confronted in the composition of editorial boards and the selection of reviewers in order to disrupt the inequities of race, ethnicity, and gender inclusion in traditional scholarly publishing.

This lack of representation affects not only the diversity of books and other publications that are produced and made available, but individuals, whose careers are at stake because *publication is central to tenure and promotion*. Voices that are not represented in the scholarly canon are not just a loss for readers of that one book or article. Lack of publication causes an erasure of voices from our academic institutions, our scholarly record, and our culture and knowledge at large, as April M. Hathcock shows in her chapter.

Inequalities in Production

We have explored the impact of race, gender, national origin, and language on the scope of scholarly communication, arguing that the transformation to open-access publishing—often framed as a justice-based intervention—will fall short unless these fundamental issues of power are addressed. Understanding scholarly communication as a material practice can help identify points of potential leverage and resistance. Scholarly communication requires the input of many forms of labor, from the inception of a research project to the dissemination of findings and analysis. This work includes defining the scope of a journal, soliciting and selecting articles, conducting the sometimes many rounds of peer review necessary to make an article ready to publish, and the production tasks of copyediting, layout, proofreading, and the task of ensuring that all metadata are correct. In addition, scholars must read, research and write in the first place, generating the text upon which all this work is applied. Some of this work—assigning DOIs, formatting text, and so forth—is invisible to scholars who are rarely asked to perform it. In turn, the work of research and writing is often understood not as labor, but as a calling higher than the maintenance work that sustains the work of scholarship.

Regardless of the affective relationship scholars have to this work, the work exists and must be remunerated. Unlike the research, writing, reviewing, and editing that are largely dominated by white men from the Global North, production work is a race-to-the-bottom sector as companies outsource the dotting of i's and the crossing of t's to the cheapest, most disposable workers. Paid work in scholarly communications continues to be available, but at increasingly lower rates, disadvantaging workers globally.³⁴

For scholars in the academy, the economic structure on the individual level remains much the same as it has. Scholars gain access to academic society journals through memberships, and university libraries subscribe to

journal databases in order to make publications available to their patrons. The scholars themselves (except in the case of a small percentage of monographs or textbooks that sell quite well) do not profit monetarily, as it is assumed that their labor is paid by external sources—either their university salaries or through grants. This is true not only for authors, but for editors and reviewers as well. Some editors and reviewers are paid a small stipend, but generally it is a gift economy, and scholars see these duties as necessary to being engaged and responsible members of the academic community. While the gift economy works for scholars located at centers of power, it disadvantages those who work outside of them, including scholars who live and work in the Global South, write from nondominant race, gender, or class perspectives, or who are part of the growing academic “precariat,” some of the 50 percent of college and university professors who teach without stable employment and for whom the work of scholarship cannot be expected to lead to the tenure and promotion that can make volunteer work on journals make sense as a use of professional time.³⁵

The challenge of developing open-access models that compensate knowledge workers drives much of the conversation around this transformation of scholarly communications.³⁶ Inequities in that labor are unevenly distributed: the work of reading and writing is reserved for a narrowing band of elite US- and European-based scholars publishing in English on topics of interest to that elite in prestigious journals headquartered in the Global North. The piecework of production is increasingly outsourced to workers in other parts of the world, who watch their pay plummet as profits are transferred to corporate publishers. Meaningful resistance to dominant forms of scholarly publishing relies on making connections between workers who are disenfranchised at every level of this process. Seeing links between the scholar whose line of inquiry is insufficiently white or Western to be published in top journals and the Indian production worker impoverished by those same systems can lead to productive points of solidarity and shared concern.

Conclusion

Ria DasGupta has argued that “when we see that university diversity programs grow out of corporate and capitalist notions of progress, we can begin to understand why universities are perhaps only putting a band aid on injustice rather than challenging the deeply-rooted structural inequities which make the university welcoming for some and not others.”³⁷ Scholarly research is

complicit in the production of social inequalities that academic universities have perpetuated across the globe. Recently, many publishing institutions have begun to pay more attention to the “problem” of diversity, though this attention has not resulted in the kind of fundamental change that would result in the redistribution of opportunity and access. The kind of change called for by the current system requires deep-rooted, radical shifts in how knowledge is produced, how it is valued, and whose voices are authorized to speak in the academy. This calls for revolution rather than progression.

What does it mean to create a new environment, a new ecosystem of scholarly communication? While open-access publishing advances equitable access to reading scholarly work, it does not automatically reverse the biases and norms of scholarship itself. Without self-reflection and organized efforts to shift power in publishing, open-access efforts risk simply replicating biases and injustices endemic to the traditional scholarly communication system. Social justice in scholarly communications requires more than the provision of access to materials through the open web. It requires true global participation—from authorship, to the tools and means of production, and to the indexing of and access to the end product. Social justice in scholarly communication requires more than representation. It requires reckoning with the labor conditions of workers whose work facilitates the scholarly conversation. Beyond the tasks described here, an ethical scholarly communications practice would also engage in fights for the wages and working conditions of all laborers along the production chain, from the ivory tower intellectual typing on their computer in Cambridge to the factory worker in China whose labor produced that computer in the first place. An ethical scholarly communications practice would consider both the Nigerian scholar who is recognized throughout Africa, as well as the environmental and labor practices around the metals that create our publishing tools. Scholarly communications is a series of material practices that could be constructed otherwise—rooted in equity and justice rather than colonization and dominance. Sustaining that radical vision and advancing toward it are critical to an Open Access Movement that can transform the world.

Notes

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