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Systemic barriers and allyship in library publishing

A case study reminder that no one is safe from racism

As librarians and library publishers, we frequently engage in scholarly communication efforts that serve a social justice agenda. For example, at the University of San Francisco, we are proud to publish the *International Journal of Human Rights Education*, of which the latest issue is devoted to indigenous women in research. There are moments, however, when we are reminded that, despite our best efforts, we still operate in an educational and academic system that is rooted in white supremacy and colonialism. The following are examples of bias encountered by the University Library System, University of Pittsburgh's (ULS) publishing program and others, as well as a discussion of the ways in which we as librarians and library publishers can push back against systemic injustices.

A case study from the University of Pittsburgh

ULS publishes open access journals in a wide variety of disciplines with partners around the world. As publisher, ULS submitted the *Central Asian Journal of Global Health* to Scopus on March 15, 2017, via online application form. We anticipated no problems with its inclusion in Scopus.

On July 2, 2018, ULS received a letter of nonacceptance from Scopus, which included the reviewer's comments. We were taken aback by several of the reasons listed by the reviewer because they were inaccurate and

did not match the information readily available on the journal's website. The reviewer questioned the journal's relationship with the University of Pittsburgh and its status as the publisher, critiqued the website as being "a formulaic commercial package" that did not relate to the library or university websites, stated it was published on a subscription basis, and questioned the term *Central Asian* as being ill-defined and applying to the authors rather than the content. The *Central Asian Journal of Global Health* is a peer-reviewed open access journal using a continuous publication model that published its inaugural issue in 2012. The journal provides a forum for discussion of all aspects of public health, medicine, and global health in Central Asia and around the world, with a specific focus on Central Asian countries, a geographic region often underrepresented in scientific literature. At this time, the journal was already being indexed in PubMed Central and Emerging Sources Citation Index, among others.

It is Scopus policy to not reevaluate reviews. However, on August 20, 2018, we sent a letter to Scopus requesting that they reevaluate our case based on the egregious

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errors in the review. In this letter, we outlined the errors from the notice of nonacceptance and provided the correct information to supplement our request for a reevaluation by Scopus. (All of the information was clearly available on the journal website at the time of the review.¹)

The notice of nonacceptance was also critical of the journal's scope and content, stating, "The very broad 'catch all' aims and scope are not convincing, and in any case the journal is only attracting 12 articles per annum with many weak articles." In our response letter, we noted that none of the 17 reviewers listed on the Scopus website appear to have training in epidemiology and global health. We requested that scholars with the appropriate subject specialty be brought in to evaluate the journal and identify ways to improve the journal for the future.

On October 15, 2018, Scopus denied our appeal request based on the "quality and number of the papers being published and the very anemic citation profile." According to the response, the "quality of the research being published in the journal is a judgment call, but it is the reviewer's judgment to make and not for me to second-guess." They acknowledged that our publisher statement made good points, specifically regarding the journal's relationship to the University of Pittsburgh and being open access, and stated that it was "unfortunate that the review appears to raise these points as central issues," a tacit acknowledgement that the reviewer's assessment was problematic and had little to no bearing on the actual quality of the research and publishing.

Racism impacts everyone

This dismissal of legitimate scholarship, in the face of a strong argument for its value by a community of scholars, is not a new problem. In his 2018 LPC blog post, Reggie Raju of the University of Cape Town (UCT)-South Africa, argued that publishing efforts out of the global south have been harmed by those in the global north who conflate low-quality publishing with characteristics like open access, mastery of English, research content, and the location of publisher.² What is unique, however, is that this problem has surfaced against a journal

published out of an American university. The Scopus reviewer dismissed this fact (among others), questioned the term *Central Asian*, and misunderstood the scope of the journal as pertaining to the authors rather than the content. The reviewer demonstrated applied ignorance and racism instead of looking closely at the crucial role the journal plays in medical literature, they based their decision on inaccurate assumptions and nonquality measures like citation and number of papers, and Scopus stood by the reviewer's decision after acknowledging the errors in the review.

In another example of inappropriate gatekeeping in scholarly communication, it was reported to us that a recent article on the application of critical librarianship practices to a subject-specific aspect of librarianship was initially rejected by a column editor. As in the case of *Central Asian Journal of Global Health*, the editor's comments reflected skepticism regarding the value of the article, did not address the article's accuracy or relevance to the scholarly conversation, and in fact, did not reflect the positive comments from the actual peer reviewers who evaluated the article.

Instead the editor's comments focused on rhetorical questions of responsibility, questioned whether the tone of the article was appropriate, and nitpicked the citations. The editor's bias demonstrated itself in classic white fragility that was personally defensive and completely ignored the peer review feedback—in violation of publishing ethics. At the request of the authors (who themselves represented the majority white female demographic of librarianship but have chosen to remain anonymous), the journal editor stepped in and corrected the review, in contrast to the experience with Scopus reported above. These are both examples that librarians who are working more purposefully toward equity, diversity, and inclusion in scholarly communication³ are more obviously encountering traditional systemic barriers regardless of their own privileged identity.

Allyship for diverse scholarly communication

As librarians continue to engage in publish-

ing, many are discovering what scholars of color have encountered for years: that racism and bias impacts our work as librarians and library publishers regardless of our identity and positionality in the privileged institutions of the global north. It is difficult in these situations to remain professional while advocating for change. Certainly, for the University of Pittsburgh, pointing out the many mistakes made by the Scopus reviewer did not help matters, and the result is, sadly, that an important emerging field is not discoverable in an influential database. But it is the hope of the authors in writing about this case that these instances are publicized to greater effect and that gatekeepers are held accountable for unprofessional or unethical behavior.

Fortunately, there are several examples of such effective allyship in scholarly communication that serve as models for action.

- The award-winning publication *Pushing the Margins: Women of Color and Intersectionality in LIS*, was the topic of a book review by an unqualified reviewer who centered their own feelings and experiences. After much public criticism on social media, the review was ultimately retracted. The *College and Research Libraries* editor and editorial board are working to evaluate and increase transparency in the reviews process. While the incident itself is regrettable, it is a hopeful change that both reviewers and editors are asked to do more and be better in this arena.

- The Society of American Archivists planned a special session for their annual meeting around a preprint of an article that critiqued, misrepresented, and took out of context the work of many scholars, notably women and people of color. Folks wrote to the editor,⁴ took to social media, wrote blog posts⁵ critiquing the article, and organized to attend the session in order to question the editor and author. The session was eventually cancelled.

- The Oregon Library Association's journal, the *OLA Quarterly*, published an issue on diversity, equity, and inclusion that concluded with an editorial that personally targeted

an expert scholar on diversity and race in children's literature. As of the writing of this column, folks are criticizing the article on social media and writing letters to the editor.⁶

It is clear from these examples that editors and reviewers can and should be held accountable to established ethical standards in scholarly communication. In fact, it is important that people with the privilege to respond publicly (and privately) do so, as editors and reviewers hold a tremendous amount of power over the reputation and success of scholars who need to publish for promotion and tenure.

Conclusion

With this in mind, we must acknowledge that allyship efforts feel risky and are not always successful. For example, outside of librarianship, 15 members of the editorial board of *Third World Quarterly* resigned in protest of an article that espoused colonialism. The article was deemed as unfit to print by peer reviewers but published anyway.⁷ Shockingly, it remains in publication, and is an example of how such practices cannot be attributed simply to implicit bias, but explicit promotion of a racist agenda in the face of community outrage. We also remind you that, for the *Central Asian Journal of Global Health* and no doubt countless other journals, there has been no justice and accountability for the fact that Scopus and its reviewers are applying arbitrary false values that have a huge impact on the scholarly communication ecosystem and the availability of knowledge.

Indeed, based on Scopus' own content coverage guide, North America and Western Europe are the source of 76.7% of their indexed active titles.⁸ With this knowledge, we advocate that it is not necessary to wait for an incident for allyship, and in this case there is personally low risk in advocating for a change in the scholarly communication ecosystem.

For example, it can be as simple as asking companies like Scopus, "What is the representation in your databases? How

does this serve equity and representation in scholarship? How are your scholarly systems working for social justice instead of working as knowledge colonizers?" Sometimes all we have to do, as purchasers and users and educators, is hold our partners accountable in providing ethical, equitable, and representative database indexing.

Notes

1. See cajgh.pitt.edu.
2. Reggie Raju, "Predatory publishing from a global south perspective," *LPC Blog Fellows Journal*, <https://librarypublishing.org/predatory-publishing-global-south-perspective/>.
3. As per the values and goals set forth in the research agenda: *Open and Equitable Scholarly Communications: Creating a More Inclusive Future*, prepared by Nancy Maron and Rebecca Kennison with Paul Bracke, Nathan Hall, Isaac Gilman, Kara Malenfant, Charlotte Roh, and Yasmeen Shorish (Chi-
4. Christine George, Twitter thread, August 2019, 6:48 a.m., https://twitter.com/_cageorge/status/1156924583519408130?s=20.
5. Eira Tansey, "Peer review for archivists (or WTF is going on with this SAA pre-print?)" August 1, 2019, <http://eiratansey.com/2019/08/01/peer-review-for-archivists-or-wtf-is-going-on-with-this-saa-pre-print/>.
6. Violet Fox, Twitter thread, October 2019, <https://twitter.com/violetbfox/status/1189654760078614529?s=20>.
7. Colleen Flaherty, "Resignations at 'Third World Quarterly,'" [insidehighered.com/news/2017/09/20/much-third-world-quarterlys-editorial-board-resigns-saying-controversial-article](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/09/20/much-third-world-quarterlys-editorial-board-resigns-saying-controversial-article).
8. Elsevier, "Scopus Content Coverage Guide," August 2017, <https://www.elsevier.com/?a=69451>. 



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