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The Need to Return the Values of Human Inquiry to Scholarly Communication with Emily Ford

Emily Ford
Portland State University, forder@pdx.edu

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Emily Ford

[00:00:00] Welcome to PDXPLORES, a Portland State Research podcast featuring scholarship innovations and discoveries, pushing the boundaries of knowledge practice and what is possible for the benefit of our communities and the world.

I'm Emily Ford, Professor in the Branford Price Millar Library.

When I was a young child in Oklahoma, I made up stories to assuage my fear. Those loud and violent thunderstorms that opened up the skies to dump rain and wind and flash powerful electricity, that was just the giants in the sky having a bowling party. I needed something to explain away my fear. I needed something that seemed rational to [00:01:00] me, a young child, that would help the anxiety, the feelings. Understanding something the way I knew how made it tolerable. As an adult, I am much less prone to make up stories, but rather I remain innately curious about how and why things are the way they are and how to contribute improvements to my communities. And yes, I still love stories and my research agenda uses narrative and storying stories to uncover the lived experiences of peer review, a small but landmark part of scholarly communication processes.

Over the past several decades, there have been innumerable improvements in innovations in scholarly communication. Technological disruption of publishing environments has afforded us the opportunity to further open access publishing. However, proprietary publishing has influenced many of the processes in the scholarly publishing ecosystem, including but not limited to increasing subscription costs, furthering a for-profit agenda that [00:02:00] changed peer review from community led to opaque and owned by publishers, as well as introducing hugely inflated article processing charges.

But through all of this, I fear that we have strayed from the point---our innate human curiosity and our collective endeavors to learn about and make sense of this world that we live on and in. Scientific research as we know it began long ago and with it scholarly communication practices. If one understands scholarly communication as the practice and study of scientific documentation, dissemination, and all its associated institutional and cultural practices, it is inherently related to being human. Research is an inherently human endeavor and began in earnest because of the vast creativity and curiosity of which the human brain is capable. Moreover, human knowledge is expressed via written and oral communication. As such, scholarly communication is inherently a human [00:03:00] practice. Scholarly communication work is about the people.

It is about our need to inquire and to share what we have learned. This is basic human connection.

I contend that it is easy in a globalized, profit driven knowledge economy for us humans to forget about ourselves and our inherent needs and values. What would be the point of unique identifiers such as Orchid or the Research Organization Registry if we did not want to connect our inquiry and discovery with others? These tools allow us to connect with people and institutions that are engaged in the human work of discovery. But too often we get into the weeds of Plan S or economic breakdown or budget cuts or austerity or neoliberal higher education or funding policies, or the greed that capitalism has introduced to proprietary publishing. There is also the move to enhance scholarly communication tasks with artificial intelligence. Writing of literature reviews, reviewer selection, the writing of referee [00:04:00] reports and other tasks have been discussed as benefiting from AI. But these all take away human connection and human inquiry, which are the core value and mission of our work.

I am a mid-career librarian who stumbled into scholarly communication work because of my interest in copyright, open access, and open peer review. While I'm not employed as a scholarly communication librarian, my research and service work follow the themes. But it has struck me that a lot of scholarly communication work can get stuck in the weeds and we forget what we are doing this for. I am of the view that librarianship is a human focused profession and have been inspired by André Cossette's *Humanism and Libraries*. In fact, I repeat R. David Lankes statement from the *Atlas of New Librarianship* to myself almost daily, "A room full of books is simply an empty closet, but an empty room with a librarian in it is a library". More recently, I have been moved by Adrienne Maree Brown's *Emergent Strategy*, which offers a positive and imaginative outlook leading me to further believe that if we reconnect with the human aspects of scholarly communication, that we will strengthen our scholarly communications systems and practices.

If we were to lead scholarly communication work with our human values, elevating inquiry, creativity and the sharing of knowledge, what systems would we create? What practices would we develop and how would those practices remain true to those values? I contend that with the proprietarization of scholarly communication by commercial institutions and entities, we are moving away from scholarly communications as a human endeavor. It is about connection and communication, not commotization. How much money do we spend on subscriptions and are researchers paying proprietary publishing to make their works available? Who benefits? Largely the proprietary publishers.

The COVID 19 pandemic has [00:06:00] taught us how important connection is. Zoom stocks are booming and we've attended Zoom happy hour and meetings between the Zoom fatigue. It has shown us how we need to find ways to connect when we are forced apart. And in this rapidly unfolding pandemic, open scholarship and scholarly communication practices allowed scientists, vaccine developers, clinicians, health professionals, and the general public to witness and learn about the knowledge we quickly gained about SARS COV-V2 and COVID 19. Open sharing of knowledge and research allowed us to quickly understand the virus and disease, and allowed scientists to develop vaccines and treatments for covid 19. This is what scholarly communication should do.

Don't get me wrong, I understand that it is not so simple to completely disrupt a global economy, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't try. I would like to propose that we refocus our scholarly communication work on human inquiry. As such, I will offer the following actions we can take that will [00:07:00] allow us to move forward on that path.

The first action would be to adopt anti-racist scholarly communication practices. Part of human inquiry and connection is about honoring who we are and our different experiences in the world. As such, we can frame our scholarly communication efforts with an anti-racist lens and work against systemic oppression and scholarly communication. These efforts are about honoring people. As individuals we can sign onto and use the anti-racist scholarly reviewing practices, heuristic for editors, reviewers, and author. Institutions, organizations, and publications should engage with the Coalition for Diversity and Inclusion in scholarly communications, anti-racism toolkit for organizations. These two publications are but two examples of guidance and work we can embrace to engage in anti-oppression work in scholarly communication.

The second action we could take would be to reframe our efforts and view them through a human lens. Let's embrace a reflective practice. How does this work reflect my values and further human inquiry and knowledge? If we can't find a good answer to this question, perhaps we should reconsider the project we're working on or the decision we are about to make. The tools we make, the policies we enact, the funding mechanisms we use, how do they reflect this value? And if they don't, what should we be doing instead?

When we ask these questions as individuals, we are advocating to reconnect to the human nature of. These questions do not have straightforward answers. And as we work in teams and organizations, the conversations we have around these

values will be messy, perhaps emotional and difficult, but all of those things are part of what it is to be human in the world. This is human work.

Another action we could take is to practice refusal. Refuse the current paradigm. Camille Noûs's 2021 article outlines the act of refusal and scholarly communication stating "Refusal in academia and scholarly communication means ceasing to negotiate, ceasing to recognize the extractive publishers and give them the benefit of our engagement". Refusal is not divestment and it is not resistance, neither of which go far enough. Nor is refusal coming to compromise our values. Noose argues that refusal and scholarly communication is to refuse the article processing charge. To refuse whiteness. To refuse vendors with unethical data practices and more, "We need to refuse crisis narratives that serve capitalism, particularly when they imply neoliberal solutions. We need to start collectively refusing our labor and time as solidarity" In this view, we build our solidarity in communities outside of the academic community as well as within to work towards liberation from capitalism and all that it entails. Refusal is a radical call, and indeed organizations and institutions are loath to fully embrace it. The Budapest Open Access Initiative 20th anniversary recommendations make gains but do not utter complete refusal. Over their four overarching recommendations, their reminder to "Remember the goals to which OA is the means" is a nod at keeping scholarly communication in line with its values. But like all radical, anti-capitalist ideals, large organizations and institutions will not fully embrace them. This tension can leave scholarly communication workers in a proverbial bind. When can we refuse? When must we simply resist? And how do we marry our personal values with what our institutions and organizations can stomach?

At the end of the day, scholarly communication must remain true to human inquiry. Scholarly communication work and systems should facilitate human connection, uplift the nature [00:11:00] of human inquiry, and help us make sense of the world we live in. Whether it's giants having a bowling party or liberating knowledge and our institutions from capitalism.