

Scholarly publishing and peer review in the Global South: the role of the reviewer

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ABSTRACT

Peer review is an integral part of contemporary scholarly publishing, especially journal publishing. Work submitted by scholars from all parts of the world is subjected to it. This includes submissions by scholars from the Global South, who wish to publish in “international” journals or in local journals which follow the same model. These authors may not be native English speakers and may be unfamiliar with the conventions of Western scholarship. Many of them conduct research and write their manuscripts under challenging circumstances. They may find it difficult to comply with the requirements of the journals to which they submit their articles. Their manuscripts quite often pose challenges to the peer reviewers. The purpose of this article is to provide some background on scholarly publishing in the Global South and the challenges those colleagues face, and to outline what this may mean for the role of the reviewer.

KEYWORDS

Peer Review; Scholarly Communication; Global South; Journals; Publishing.

Introduction

Without authors there would be no need for peer review. In this article I argue that an understanding of the circumstances in which authors from the Global South conduct research and produce manuscripts for submission to ‘international’ journals will be helpful to the reviewers of those manuscripts. To the extent that peer review is a process of facilitation rather than a barrier, such understanding should help to create a scholarly communication environment that is beneficial to scholarship in both the Global South and the Global North.

The term ‘Global South’ (or ‘South’) is used here to refer to the countries, not only in the southern hemisphere, but also those in the northern hemisphere, which have often been referred to as the ‘developing countries’, ‘developing and emerging countries’, the ‘developing world’, etc. All of these labels are inadequate. Some have acquired negative connotations. The term ‘South’ was given credence by the South Commission (South Commission 1990). It has a less judgmental connotation than “developing”. More recently, the term ‘Global South’ has come into general use (cf. Dados and Connell 2012). In this context the countries of the developed North are referred to as the Global North (or ‘North’).

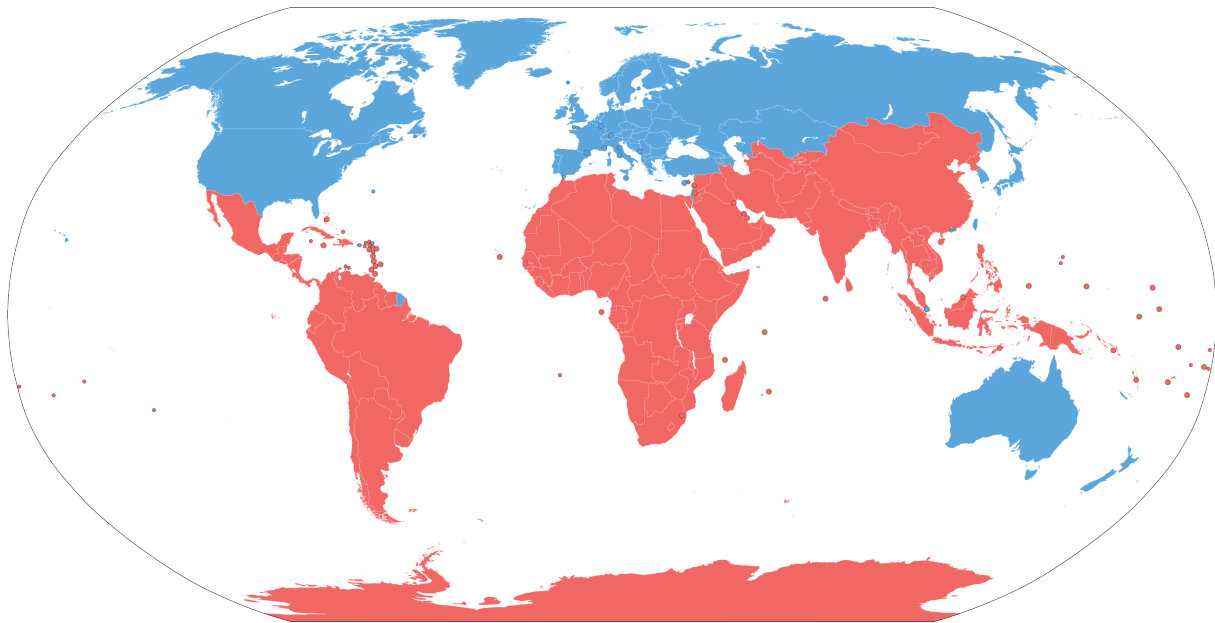


Figure 1. Global North and Global South. Source: Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Global_North_and_Global_South#/media/File:Global_North_and_Global_South.svg (Map by Kingj123, Public domain)

As the map in figure 1 shows, the countries of the Global South vary enormously in size, population, and economic strength. My focus will be on the low and lower middle-income countries in the group, which mostly have smaller, less affluent, and less sophisticated economies. This is generally reflected in their education systems, the resources and infrastructure they have for research and innovation, and in their research output (cf. Lor 2019, 549-54).

The terms ‘reviewer’ and ‘referee’ are widely used as synonyms. However, the term ‘peer review’ is so well established that in our context it is appropriate to prefer the term ‘reviewer’. My focus is

on peer review of scholarly journal articles along traditional (Western) lines. The general purpose, practice, and challenges of peer review are dealt in other articles in this issue.

This article is based, on the one hand, on selected sources from the literature on scholarly communication in the Global South and peer review, and on the other, on my experience since the 1980s as a peer reviewer and a member of the editorial boards of around a dozen LIS journals. Inevitably, it is coloured by my location and experience in sub-Saharan Africa, so that literature dealing with that region is over-represented. It deals with systemic issues, mainly political-economic in nature, affecting scholarly communication and peer review in the Global South, the peer reviewing process and role of the reviewer, and possible ameliorative measures.

We live in one world. The flow of information, in the form of research findings and other scholarly literature, from North to South (as knowledge inputs to education, scholarship, and development) and from South to North (as knowledge contributions from the South to enrich the world generally) are in effect two sides of the same coin. For purposes of analysis, I try here to separate them. I deal first with inputs into scholarly activity.

Asymmetric access to knowledge

Peer review in the Global South must be seen in the context of the international political-economic factors affecting science, scholarship, and scholarly communication in that admittedly very diverse region. A number of factors have inhibited science and scholarship there. In comparison with the wealthier countries of the North, the Global South has to cope with grave deficiencies in respect of resources such as education and training, human resources, information, communication, research infrastructure, technology and, in particular, access to the Internet (Chan and Costa 2005; Abrahams et al. 2008; Lor 2019, 400-404). Of these, information is arguably the most critical input. It is vital to education and training, to research and development.

A large proportion of the information needed for the development of the Global South has to come from North America and Western Europe. The other regions of the world remain net importers of knowledge (Mazloumian et al. 2013). For example, Southern Africa's contribution to global research output has been declining, rather than growing (Abrahams et al. 2008, 44). It is expensive to import knowledge, and it has to be paid for in scarce foreign currency.

Access to resources other than information is also affected by the asymmetrical relationship between North and South, as suggested by Abrahams and his colleagues. Here one can mention the funding needed for informal education such as foreign travel, conference attendance, and international exchanges. Reduced teaching loads would also help, as would better remuneration of teaching and research staff, so that young researchers are not forced to take on after-hours jobs to support themselves and their families. Funds are needed for the acquisition and maintenance of educational and research technology, not least of which is digital technology and communications infrastructure such as broadband Internet connectivity. Here 'last mile' connectivity to the workplace, schoolroom and home, and the skills needed to maintain the technology and connections must not be overlooked (Assefa, Rorissa, and Alemneh 2021).

The intellectual property barrier

Nowhere is the asymmetry more debilitating than in the stifling effect of the international intellectual property regime on access to knowledge for education and research in the Global South. Since the Second World War, scholarly publishing, and in particular the publishing of scholarly journals, has become a big and profitable industry. Journal publishing is dominated internationally by a handful of very large corporations based in North America and Western Europe (Larivière, Haustein, and Mongeon 2015). As publishing has become increasingly electronic, publishers have been enabled to pursue every cent they can extract from selling access to their intellectual property – produced by the intellectual labour of the world’s scholars but owned by the publishers. Since scholars typically sign away their copyright for the sake of being published, neither they nor the institutions that employ them share in the income. Instead, their institutions may well have to pay copyright fees to reproduce their articles for teaching.

The major publishers exert constant pressure on their governments in the Global North to enact more restrictive copyright laws (Benkler 2010, 12).

Skilfully using the mechanisms of intellectual property treaties and trade agreements. Western governments pressurise governments in the Global South to enact legislation which is far too restrictive in relation to the conditions in those countries – and far more restrictive than the legislation (if any) in existence when the countries of the Global North were still developing. The result is that access to knowledge needed for education, research, development and health care may be simply unaffordable (Lor 2019, 400-409).

The intellectual property stranglehold is an excellent if devastating illustration of the unequal relations between North and South, of the gap between powerful and exploitative ‘core’ (developed) countries on the one hand, and weak and exploited ‘peripheral’ (developing) countries on the other, as interpreted by post-World War 2 dependency and modernization theorists (cf. Reyes 2001; Graaff 2003; Matunhu 2011). Not only do the above constraints affect the flow of information from North to South, but they also, often more subtly, affect the flow of information from South to North, as well as the flow of information within the Global South (Lor 2019, 440-56).

Various schemes have been initiated to help low-income countries gain access to scholarly literature from the North (Das 2015, 47-52). A growing percentage of scholarly literature is published on open access (Piwowar et al. 2017). Many research universities, research institutions, and government entities require their staff, students and grantees to deposit their work in institutional repositories or make open access a condition of publications. Open access was growing at about one percent per year, but in 2012 only 12% of newly published papers were thought to be freely accessible online (Laakso and Björk 2012), whereas in 2018 the Open Society Foundation claimed that about 28 percent of peer reviewed articles are on open access.¹ Internet Access is becoming easier, but open access also entails costs and it is not without some challenges, such as the proliferation of journals of questionable quality (Risnes 2018). The extra-legal Russian-based repository of pirated content Sci-Hub is reported to be heavily used by researchers in the Global South – in

¹ Open Society Foundation, “What is ‘Open Access?’”, <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/explainers/what-open-access>.

relative, not absolute terms (Till et al. 2019). Researchers also use work-arounds such as requesting copies directly from authors.

Access to knowledge produced in the Global South

What is produced in the Global South, and how and where are the research outputs disseminated? A sense of the situation ‘on the ground’ can be obtained from a study conducted in 2007 by the Southern African Regional Universities Association, SARUA (Abrahams et al. 2008). Researchers interviewed 89 respondents at eight universities in seven countries in Southern Africa. The study focussed on access to research produced in this region. It found a general lack of awareness of what has been produced, both in the originating countries themselves and in other countries in the region. The research tended to be poorly organized. Bibliographic control was poor; it was not indexed or made available electronically, resources for doing this being lacking. Much of the research output was unpublished. A reluctance of researchers to share their research contributed to this. It was thought that these individuals jealously guarded their work because of fierce competition with colleagues for scarce research resources. On the other hand, those who wished to publish their work, preferred to publish it in what were seen as prestigious ‘international’ journals rather than locally. In many countries, having work published in ‘international’ journals is a precondition for career advancement (Abrahams et al. 2008, 25; Meneghini, Packer, and Nassi-Calò 2008).

The preference for publishing in ‘international’ journals and the pressure to do so is problematic in several respects. The very term ‘international’ is problematic. It seems to be more difficult for a journal published in Buenos Aires or Delhi to be recognized as an ‘international’ journal than for one published in Amsterdam or Boston. It is a question of neoliberal economics. A journal which publishes significant articles by highly regarded authors gains prestige. This pleases the publisher, for its circulation grows and the price of access to it (by subscriptions or online purchases) can be increased. The prestige attracts other authors, an illustration of the ‘Matthew effect’². Many of their submissions will be rejected. Ironically, the higher the rejection rate, the more desirable it becomes for ambitious authors. Getting an article published in such a journal takes a great deal of time and effort. Foreign currency is needed to pay article processing charges. There may be other impediments.

If and when an article from the Global South is published in an ‘international’ journal, the article may be difficult for the author’s colleagues or students to access because their institution cannot afford to subscribe to it (Abrahams et al. 2008, 39; Omekwu 2003). Similarly, it may be inaccessible to colleagues at other institutions in the author’s home country and in other less affluent countries in the Global South. In such a case, some transfer of knowledge may have taken place from South to North, but South-South transfer – transfer to where that knowledge could be most relevant and needed – is impeded.

² The Matthew effect takes its name from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 25, verse 29: “...everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance”.

Obstacles to publishing in ‘international’ journals

Scholars in the Global South aspiring to publish in high-ranking journals face various obstacles. In addition to logistical disadvantages, such as difficulties gaining access to research literature from the Global North, as referred to above, they include the lack of publishing experience and skills, lack of research funding and facilities, and lack of support from their institutions. Several of these were illustrated by first-hand accounts in Brady et al. (2021). In the following paragraphs, attention is paid to some further obstacles.

Obstacles to publishing in ‘international’ journals: Bias

There have been persistent reports of bias against authors from the Global South. This theme is of particular relevance when we discuss peer review. Of course, bias can occur not only in the peer reviewing process, but also as a result of editorial policies intended to safeguard the prestige of a journal. When authors from the Global South perceive that they are the victims of bias, it is not easy to determine whether this is because of where they are located, or because of their ethnicity. Bias on the basis of country of origin has been called ‘geographic bias’. This is a relatively neutral term, less emotionally loaded than ‘ethnocentric bias’, which is thought to occur simply because the authors are not obviously from the Global North. (Gender bias against women and minority authors is also discussed in the literature but is not considered here.) In cases of geographic bias, authors whose correspondence addresses or institutional affiliations are in the Global South, are discriminated against: they may be less likely to have their submissions accepted by ‘international’ journals. The perception of some authors from the Global South is that their work may be judged more severely, and be subject to more delays before approval. In the most egregious cases an address in the Global South may be enough to generate a rejection letter. In 1995, Wayne Gibbs, a staff writer of *Scientific American*, cited a respected Mexican scholar, Luis Benitez-Bribiesca, who reported that his work, which had been published in top journals while he lived in Europe was being accepted less frequently after he moved to Mexico. In his article, Gibbs identified and documented widespread evidence of bias against scientific authors from the Global South. Journal editors from the Global South reported that their journals were less frequently indexed in major international databases. Only 2% of the articles indexed in the *Science Citation Index* came from the Global South. Several editors of major journals published in the North told Gibbs that they believed the low representation of the South in their journals accurately reflected the poor quality of science in poor nations (Gibbs 1995).

Twenty-seven years have passed since Gibbs’s article appeared. Are his findings still relevant? A decade later, an empirical study comparing articles by authors from four Latin American countries with those from five developed countries found that the Latin American-authored articles, especially those lacking co-authors from the North, attracted fewer citations. Because editors strive for high citation impact factors for their journals, this could discourage them from accepting articles by authors from the Global South. Mention was also made of evidence that Brazilian authors seeking to publish in high status journals avoided citing their compatriots (Meneghini, Packer, and Nassi-Calò 2008).

There is reason to believe that there has been some improvement in this dismal record, but bias has not gone away. Matthew Harris and his colleagues have undertaken several empirical studies

to determine whether bias against authors from the Global South can be proven. In an article published in 2017, they provide a useful list of citations and report on a study using methods from cognitive psychology to investigate whether healthcare professionals implicitly associate good research with rich countries more than with poor countries. They found this to be the case (M. Harris et al. 2017). But bias in peer review is difficult to prove. A systematic review of empirical studies of bias limited to robustly conducted studies, using peer-reviewed, controlled, and randomized methods, yielded only three worth analysing, and only one of these gave firm evidence of geographic bias (Skopec et al. 2020).

Therefore, whilst it can be shown statistically that the acceptance rate for submissions from the Global South is lower than that from the North, it is more difficult to determine whether this is due to simple bias on the part of editors and reviewers, or to quality issues. In fact, the decision to reject may have nothing to do with quality, but could rather be due to other factors such as the subject matter or the research paradigm of the submissions.

There are more indirect, as it were accidental, ways in which journal editors are thought to discriminate against authors from the Global South. The topics of high relevance to the Global South may generate little interest in the North. If authors want to be published in top journals, they can improve their chances by researching topics more likely to be of interest to the readership of those journals. This means that top scholarly talent is siphoned away from more practical, applied research on developmentally relevant topics (George Ellis, cited in Gibbs 1995, 98).

A respondent to the SARUA study commented:

The whole process of having [an article] published [in an ‘international journal] is a constraint. The kind of studies conducted elsewhere compared to the studies conducted in our region, are different. Our studies are exploratory and qualitative in nature’. Other respondents explained that their research has a much greater problem-solving focus and does not necessarily lead to scientific publication (Abrahams et al. 2008, 38).

Obstacles to publishing in ‘international’ journals: Language and cultural barriers

The language barrier also serves as an indirect way to inhibit publication of work from the Global South. Today English is the dominant language of science. Around 80% of journal indexed in *Scopus* are in English. The hegemony of English reinforces the dominance of an Anglo-American worldview and marginalizes the cultures of other language communities (Márquez and Porras 2020; McElroy and Bridges 2018). This has implications for researchers in the Global South, where ‘non-native speakers’ of English suffer disadvantages, when compared with native speakers of English. (cf. Flowerdew 2001)

The position of English is so dominant that speakers of major Western languages such French, German and Spanish increasingly feel themselves obliged to publish in English, in order to reach more readers and garner more citations (Huttner-Koros 2015). This was borne out in a study of papers published in Argentinian journals (Di Bitetti and Ferreras 2017). Using English adds significantly to the effort required from a non-native speaker to produce a paper. A further disadvantage is that scientific knowledge is often unavailable in local languages. The converse also holds true: if scholars read only work in English, they may be missing important contributions and

insights (Amano, González-Varo, and Sutherland 2016). Both cases perpetuate subtle bias against the Global South. It has been suggested that the use of English serves as an ‘invisible paywall’, which cuts non-English speakers off from much of the world’s scholarly literature, and went so far as to suggest that we revive late 19th Century initiatives to create an artificial language for scholarly communication (MoChridhe 2019). Scientific findings need to be communicated clearly to the public, as has been demonstrated by the Covid pandemic. The public cannot be informed only in English (Taskin et al. 2020).

A final area of bias has to do with the dominance or hegemony of Western research paradigms (Okamoto 2015; Shipley and Williams 2019). There are increasing calls for the recognition of non-Western science (e.g. Haverkort 2007; Millar 2007) and for the decolonization of scholarship (e.g. Chilisa 2005; Kumar, Mukharji, and Prasad 2018). This is a huge and complex field that I cannot begin to cover here. Suffice it to say that scholars from the Global South to whom the Western worldview is foreign, need to make mental shifts to work within the dominant Western paradigm, while those who prefer to work in non-Western paradigms are likely to find it difficult to get their work accepted in the “mainstream” journals. This is unfortunate, as these journals insulate their readers from potentially fruitful avenues of research.

Alternatives to ‘international’ journals

The problems outlined above leave scholars in the Global South in a dilemma: they can seek to publish at great effort and cost in a prestigious journal which may be inaccessible to their colleagues in their countries and regions, or publish with less effort in relatively obscure and low-ranked local journals. A third option, which may appear very attractive to young academics needing to add publications to their CVs, is to publish in one of the many vanity journals, or ‘predatory journals’ which actively tout for work from inexperienced and unwary scholars (Balehegn 2017). Much has been written about this problem, which I will not belabour here.

Whilst major journals are published as commercially viable propositions by profitable corporations, there is little to be gained commercially by publishing scholarly journals in the Global South. There national and local journals are

...published and supported because they report important, practical information that would be declined, either because the topic is of only local or marginal interest, or because the research does not meet the high standards for publication at an international level (Meneghini 2012).

Since not many local journals are likely to be indexed and abstracted internationally, bibliographic control of articles published in the low-income countries tends to be haphazard. Respondents to the SARUA study reported that gaining access to journals published in the Southern African region was a major constraint (Abrahams et al. 2008, 39). It goes without saying that these articles are unlikely to garner much attention in the Global North.

Many ‘local’ journals, journals published for small readerships in developing countries, do not inspire confidence. Some are poorly edited and produced, appear irregularly, struggle to stay afloat financially, and have a low life expectancy. The quality of contributions may be questionable. Editors face a constant struggle to secure funding, solicit good manuscripts, and retain competent and

responsive persons with the skills required to carry out editorial and reviewing duties. Southern African researchers reported perceptions of poor quality and standards, given the limited number of experienced and senior researchers to perform peer review functions (Abrahams et al. 2008, 39; see also S. Harris 2015). To a large extent, seen from the North, these journals are obscure and of little interest. As indicated above, this obscurity extends to the Global South.

It is now fourteen years since the SARUA study was carried out. In the meantime, there has been some improvement. In part this is due to the increasing turn to electronic publishing of local journals, particularly those based at universities. Connectivity has improved and local institutions have gained experience in electronic publishing. Many universities and research institutions in the Global South have set up institutional repositories. Today scholars in the Global South are no longer so reliant on the expensive indexing and abstracting databases produced in the North, to which many institutions in the Global South cannot afford to subscribe. Instead, I see students and scholars alike turning first to search engines such as Google. Google Scholar is taking the place of the major citation indexes (with the added advantage that Google's coverage is far wider (Gusenbauer 2019), extending to quite obscure journals that do not meet the quality criteria of Web of Science or SCOPUS. The total absence of quality control on the Web is of course not without risks!

Interventions to improve journal publishing in the Global South

Online publishing

Two interventions which have made a big difference to journal publishing in the Global South need to be mentioned here: aid programmes to upgrade journals, and the establishment of national journals.

A number of aid agencies have come forward to help upgrade journal publishing in the Global South. The best-known is INASP, the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Information, based in Oxford, England. Initially INASP was concerned with access to information from the Global North in a number of countries of the South. But noting the under-utilization of the journals to which INASP was facilitating affordable online access, INASP introduced new interventions to upgrade the skills of IT staff, library staff, and library users in the relevant universities. In 1998 INASP started addressing problems of scholarly publishing in the Global South, starting in Africa, where a platform for electronic publishing, called African Journals Online, was set out. It carried over 200 journals, and was later spun off to a South African-based company, NISC (National Inquiry Services Centre) (Smart 2005). These journals are all peer reviewed, and the South African journals are accredited with the South African Department of Higher Education and Training.

Similar "journals online" services were launched in a number of countries in Asia. From 2002 to 2012 INASP ran a programme called PERI (Programme for the Enhancement of Research Information), which, among other interventions, offered training workshops on online journal design and production, editing skills, copyright, marketing, and strategy (Gwynn 2008). Among various other initiatives, online courses were offered to journal editors (Cumming 2021). In 2017 INASP launched the Journal Publishing, Practices and Standards (JPPS) framework, which provided

internationally accepted criteria for assessing the quality of journals in the Global South (INASP n.d.; S. Harris 2018a).

While INASP was developing its programmes in Africa, a rather similar programme was being born in Brazil: SciELO (Scientific Electronic Library Online) was founded in 1997 with funding from FAPESP (the State of São Paulo Research Foundation). Its aim was to improve the quality and impact of the best journals published in Brazil. SciELO started by putting a number of selected journals online on open access, following the “gold” model.³ This was followed by the development of an indexing database which could be used to monitor the usage and citing of the articles. Assistance was provided by the Latin American and Caribbean Center on Health Sciences Information, better known as BIREME (Biblioteca Regional de Medicina). Other countries soon joined the system, first in Latin America and the Caribbean, then Portugal and Spain, and South Africa. These countries participate through national SciELO coordinating institutions, mainly government departments or agencies, which maintain national collections. They are responsible *inter alia* for selecting the best journals and ensuring quality. In South Africa the agency responsible for selecting and evaluating the journals included in the SciELO SA collection is the Department of Higher Education and Training, the selection and monitoring being done on its behalf by the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf).⁴ Currently South Africa has around 80 such journals. As in the case of INASP, the platform greatly enhances the visibility, accessibility, credibility, and impact (citation rate) of the journals. It has also led to greater professionalism in the editorial processes (Packer 2010).

National journals

The second major intervention which has enhanced the quality of journals published in the Global South is the creation or recognition of national journals. The term ‘national journal’ is not used everywhere with the same meaning. In the broadest sense (1) it means any journal published in a country. In the slightly narrower sense, (2) it refers to journals of national or nation-wide significance as distinct from local journals. In a more formal sense (3) it may refer to a journal which has some formal recognition from national government or a designated national agency. In the narrowest sense, (4) it is a journal which additionally is partly or wholly funded by the relevant national government or agency. The creation or recognition of national journals is in most cases aimed at encouraging and upgrading the standard of science and scholarship, research and innovation in the country, and at enhancing the country’s standing in the international scholarly community, especially by increasing the number of citations to the country’s journals. Countries which have formal systems of national journals include Brazil, India, and South Africa. There are many others, and not only in the Global South. Countries which have established national journals offer their researchers “two parallel communication streams” to choose from, a “selective route” in the form of ‘international’ journals, and a “regional route” in the form of national journals (Meneghini 2012).

³ In the gold open access model, the publisher makes the content available gratis immediately upon publication. Wikipedia, “Gold OSA”, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open_access#Gold_OA.

⁴ ASSAf, Academy of Science of South Africa, “SciELO South Africa”, <https://www.assaf.org.za/2014/06/05/open-access-scielo-sa>.

In South Africa there are currently 280 ‘accredited journals’.⁵ These are journals which meet specified quality criteria and qualify for official subsidies. In addition, South African university staff and students received research credits for publishing in them, as they do when publishing in foreign journals indexed in Web of Science, SCOPUS and the *International Bibliography of the Social Sciences*.⁶ The accredited South African journals are in effect national journals of types (3) and (4). This is relevant to our focus on peer review because the accredited journals are required to maintain proper peer review procedures. Thus, there is pressure on these journals, both from the Department, and from authors (who want their articles to earn research credits), to conduct credible peer review – in addition to appearing at regular intervals, having representative editorial boards, and maintaining acceptable editorial and publishing standards.⁷

Peer review in domestic journals

Peer review is essential, but holds pitfalls. In a small research community, especially one using a language which is not widely spoken internationally, the pool of potential reviewers is small. The researchers there know one another and they know the research activities of their colleagues. This makes double blind peer review difficult to achieve. Reviewers know who the anonymous authors are, and realize that their identities may well be known to the author whose submission they are reviewing. This creates awkward situations. In a competitive environment, it may happen that some reviewers can’t suppress their prejudices, seek to protect their own standing, or even want to settle old scores. Scholarly communities are made up of less than perfect human beings. A South African scholar reported:

In various African and other developing countries, and especially recently in South Africa, ...peer review has come under fire for bias, and specifically for its ‘politics’. Anecdotal evidence abounds of biased editors and reviewers forming cliques and allowing entry only to those who satisfy their own, self-established admission criteria (Le Roux 2010, 317).

She added that, given the confidentiality surrounding the peer review process, these claims are difficult to substantiate. In an analysis of the publications of the University of South Africa and its university press, she traced the largely self-imposed ideological and political constraints which determined its selections during the apartheid and post-apartheid periods, concluding that peer review and other structural factors were used to either exclude or include certain authors and their views”, but added that “it remains unclear whether other forms of review would fare any better when exposed to scrutiny” (Le Roux 2010, 324).

A more pointed critique came from Nomthandazo Ntlama, who wrote from the perspective of a [Black South African] “emerging scholar”. She complained that established scholars had been

⁵ These include a number of regional (African and Southern African) journals, not all of which are based in South Africa, which have significant editorial input from South Africa.

⁶ University of Pretoria, “Accredited journals”, <https://www.library.up.ac.za/journalsaccredited>.

⁷ South Africa. Department of Higher Education and Training, “Procedure for inclusion into the DHET list”, <https://www.dhet.gov.za/Policy%20and%20Development%20Support/Procedure%20for%20Inclusion%20into%20the%20DHET%20List.pdf>.

using peer review as an instrument to affirm academic power negatively (Ngobeni 2010, 304). In South Africa anti-discriminatory policies have been adopted. These include a set of principles for peer reviewing. Whilst all these measures are well-intended, young scholars continue to encounter difficulties. These include the handicaps referred to earlier in relation to publishing in ‘international’ journals, and especially the lack of writing and language skills – which may be misused by a reviewer as a pretext to reject the submission – lack of mentorship and coaching by seniors, and research funding policies that are unfavourable to young scholars. Ntlama quoted a list of six categories of factors “that have the potential to inhibit the generation of new knowledge by young scholars” by A. Williamson, of which I cite three here that are particularly relevant to peer review:

‘Subjectivity’ concerns summary rejections by the editor without sending the paper to referees, and the choice of referee by the editor (choosing, for example, a known harsh referee for a paper the editor wishes to see rejected).

‘Bias’ concerns discrimination against authors because of their nationality, native language, gender or host institution. It can also cover occasions when the referee and author are competitors in some sense, or when they belong to warring schools of thought.

‘Abuse’ by referees includes plagiarism (stealing others’ as yet unpublished work that has been sent to them for peer review) and deliberately delaying publication of potentially competing work (cited in Rowland 2002, 250-51).

It should be borne in mind that the problems listed by Rowland derive from observations in the Global North. However, from Ntlama’s article one gets the sense that they are very pertinent to her experience as a young South Africa scholar. I am aware of similar anecdotes.

Typical problems encountered by reviewers

It is clear that authors from the Global South face many obstacles. The other side of the coin is that of the problems with which peer reviewers are confronted. Reviewing submissions from the Global South can be time-consuming, frustrating and disheartening.

Typical problems encountered by reviewers

To categorize typical problems here, I adapt the framework given to reviewers by one of the major journal publishers in our field of LIS. Under each rubric I list some typical problems that I have encountered as a reviewer of manuscripts from the Global South.

1. *Originality: Does the paper contain new and significant information adequate to justify publication?*

Quite often submitted articles deal with obscure institutions and regions which are of no intrinsic interest and are unlikely to be of interest to the international readership of the relevant journal, unless the authors made some theoretical or methodological contribution. Unfortunately many manuscripts are offered in a theoretical vacuum and the research paradigm can best be described as naïve empiricism (cf. Lor 2019, 101-2).

2. *Relationship to Literature: Does the paper demonstrate an adequate understanding of the relevant literature in the field, and correctly cite all significant work?*

Reviewers in LIS journals are called upon to review submissions on many different topics. These articles often have references on local topics and in languages which the reviewer cannot read. This makes it difficult to answer this question. My subjective impression is that (with some exceptions) thanks to the Web, adequate lists of reasonably recent references are often presented. However, articles from suspect journals, including known predatory titles do occur, the literature surveys are sometimes superficial, and lacking in more recent work. Problems in respect of citation technique are common. For example, in-text citations are not correctly matched with entries in the list of references (or not all), reference style is often inconsistent. Not infrequently references are so garbled or incomplete that the items to which they refer are difficult to find.

3. *Methodology: Is the paper's argument built on an appropriate base of theory and conceptual framework? Is the design of the research sound? Are the methods employed clearly set out and appropriate?*

This is usually the rubric that receives the most comments, in part because it is also something of a 'catch-all' rubric for comments that cannot be accommodated elsewhere on the prescribed form. Multiple problems are encountered here. Descriptions of the methodology are not infrequently confused and barely intelligible. Authors have many difficulties with concepts and their definitions, causing confusion throughout the article, for example, measuring indicators that do not match the constructs to be measured. The rationale for the selection or creation of data collection instruments is not given, and those in appendices are not linked to the text. Sampling is a frequent problem area, with much confusion as to when a population or a sample is being used. Often authors do not seem to be aware when they are using non-probability samples.

4. *Results: Are results presented clearly and analysed appropriately? Are the conclusions defensible and adequate?*

Often inferential statistics are improperly applied to non-probability samples. Unnecessarily sophisticated statistics are sometimes applied to very small samples. The presentation and discussion of findings is often superficial, when authors fail to engage with their findings, for example to try to account for unexpected results or anomalies. As a result, conclusions are sometimes frustratingly meagre when the author could have extracted more value from the findings. Often, conclusions do not address the question(s) set out in the problem statement. There is a tendency to repeat roughly the same rather superficial comments in the findings, discussion, and conclusion, possibly under the influence of 'recipes' recommended for theses. These are not always related to the literature that was dealt with in the literature review; if they are, the relation between literature and discussion is sometimes superficial.

5. *Implications for research, practice and/or society: Does the paper identify clearly any implications for the useful application of the research in practice? Implications for further research?*

This is not often dealt with more than superficially, and recommendations do not necessarily flow from the findings.

6. *Quality of Communication: Is appropriate technical language used? Is the language clear and unambiguous so as to be understood by the journal's likely readership?*

Submissions from authors in the Global South often contain spelling and grammatical errors and unidiomatic use of English, when correct words are used in the wrong word order, idiomatic expressions are inappropriately used, or the definite and indefinite articles are incorrectly used or omitted. 'False friends' occur frequently in writing by non-native speakers of English, and not only in writing from the Global South.

These problems are excusable when authors are not native speakers of English. They should not be used as a pretext for rejecting a submission, and they should not be belaboured by the reviewer in a way that is discouraging to the author. In some cases, the use of English is so poor that parts of the text become unintelligible. These authors should be advised to engage professional language and editorial assistance, and make use of standard style manuals, if available locally.⁸ Numerous commercial author advisory services are advertised on the Web, but may be too expensive to engage. The literature on peer review includes insightful discussions of language issues (e.g. Flowerdew 2001; Meneghini 2012). Often, however, there are typing errors that could have been caught out if a spell checker which comes standard with the word-processing software, had been used. Too often there is evidence of what appears to the reviewer to be annoying carelessness, making the reviewer wonder whether the author is taking the work seriously enough.

Here attention should also be paid to the structure of an article and the articulation and format of the components of which it is composed. Inexperienced authors often follow a formula or recipe which sets out the sequence of components as taught in graduate school, but may not fully grasp what the different functions of those components are, including them merely as a kind of formality. The website of the electronic journal *PLOS One* offers a page devoted to "manuscript organization" which sets out the various elements of a manuscript along with instructions for each. Aspiring authors should be urged to study – and adhere to – the instructions for authors which are provided by each journal in more or less detail.⁹

As a general comment: many of the problems I have encountered reflect poor training, lack of role models, and absence of effective mentorship, as suggested by Ntlama (2010). Richard Horton, editor of *The Lancet*, interviewed by Gibbs (1995) suggested that cultural differences and lack of familiarity with Western norms might account for some of the problems. This includes the apparent carelessness referred to above.

Remedial measures

To deal with the above problems, remedial measures should be taken both at the individual and at the systemic level.

⁸ There are several (expensive) American manuals of style for authors, such as the Chicago manual of style, such as the *Chicago manual of style*. These should be made available in research libraries. Young authors should be provided with information about these resources and the free alternatives, such as the websites of many university and college libraries, and be encouraged to use them.

⁹ PLOS One, "Manuscript organization", <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/s/submission-guidelines>, accessed 2022-09-20.

At the individual level, peer reviewers should be aware of the barriers that authors from the Global South have to overcome, and should, if at all possible, go beyond the requirements of strict summative assessment, which focusses on the decision whether to accept or reject, to an approach of formative assessment, which provides guidance to help the author improve the manuscript so that it can have a reasonable chance of acceptance. This requires considerably more effort, including providing detailed comments, guidance and advice on how to improve the work. My practice is to complete the editor's online evaluation form briefly, and to add a separate, much longer and more detailed commentary. These point out specific errors of spelling, syntax, and semantics, as well as instances where it is difficult or impossible to discern what the author wanted to say because the author got tripped up by the English language. I try to point this out helpfully, making suggestions for improvement, and not belabour trifling points too much. When I can see that an author's work has potential I try – sometimes with difficulty – not to let my disappointment about the shortcomings shine through too much. There is no place for sarcasm in peer review. Most of the feedback is made available to the author in the appropriate version, but some is only included in the editor's version of the comments, as provided for by the editorial software.

At the systemic level, various initiatives have been undertaken since the 1990s to train editors, authors, and to a lesser extent, reviewers. Gibbs (1995) reported that Richard Horton, editor of a highly regarded medical journal, mentioned above, was assembling a global network of medical researchers to assist editors in the Global South in setting up peer review processes. The training provided to journal editors by SciELO and INASP is relevant here. INASP runs a comprehensive programme of author training called AuthorAID, a free global network that provides support, mentoring, resources and training for researchers in low- and middle-income countries to help them publish their work. AuthorAID provides online training and an online platform which in 2017 allowed a network of some 17,000 researchers to connect with mentors, mentees and collaborators (AuthorAID 2017; Nobes 2021). Peer review does not feature prominently, but INASP has participated in the annual international Peer Review Week (S. Harris 2018b). Peer Review Week is an annual virtual event focussing on various aspects of peer review. It has a website in which other conferences and events relating to peer review are publicized.¹⁰ Major journal publishers have websites providing training for authors and reviewers. Examples are Wiley Author Services¹¹ and the online Certified Peer Reviewer Course offered by Elsevier's Researcher Academy.¹² It should come as no surprise that publishers invest in such training. Along with authors, peer reviewers provide publishers with highly labour-intensive services largely free of charge.

Also at the systemic level, we should note various proposals to reform the peer review process, amongst them replacing blind peer review with open peer review, and the scholarly publishing system more generally (cf. Ngobeni 2010)

¹⁰ Peer review Week, <https://peerreviewweek.wordpress.com/prw-2022-activities/>, accessed 2022-09-21.

¹¹ Wiley Author Services, "Peer review training", <https://authorservices.wiley.com/Reviewers/journal-reviewers/becoming-a-reviewer.html/peer-review-training.html>, accessed 2022-09-21

¹² Elsevier Researcher Academy, "Certified Peer Reviewer Course", <https://researcheracademy.elsevier.com/navigating-peer-review/certified-peer-reviewer-course>, accessed 2022-09-20.

Conclusion

Voices from the South must be heard. It is a moral imperative; it also makes good sense. Climate change, pandemics, terrorism, food insecurity, and migration, to name just a few current global challenges, do not stop where North meets South, and rich meets poor. Scholarship from that vast and diverse region we have called the Global South can and must contribute solutions, insights, and humanness. Peer review is important as a quality filter for scholarship, but may not serve as a barrier to difference, to the other. Such barriers impoverish us all.

Thus, I argue that the role of the peer reviewer includes giving a voice to the South, helping to redress the imbalance of South-North and North-South flows of information and knowledge. In this I support Mauro Guerrini's plea for a more collaborative approach (Guerrini 2021). Peer review should be a teaching and learning process. It requires some understanding of where authors in the Global South are coming from, patience, and more time than many of us think we can spare. But nurturing talent can be very rewarding.

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