



The heart of the matter: Journal editors and journals

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Abstract

Publication in peer-reviewed journals is the life-blood of academic existence. Yet surprisingly little research has been devoted to the views of the journal editors who play such a central role in this process. This essay reports a pilot project which set out to shed some light on these views. As editors of two peer-reviewed journals in the fields of journalism and journalism studies, the essay's authors initially drew upon their own experience to identify common issues facing journal editors. Their approach was also informed by perspectives acquired from the personal experience of their own global positioning – one located on the periphery of the Global North and one in the Global South.

An online questionnaire was distributed to editors of 24 journals in the fields of communication, journalism and journalism studies. The essay reports that the responses received suggest that journal editors are not only conversant with a plethora of complicated and vexing problems, but also have developed a range of successful strategies for responding to them. At the same time, however, publication – or, rather, non-publication – of papers authored in the Global South is a contentious issue which produced divergent responses. The authors conclude that this is the issue most likely to become politicised in future.

Keywords

Academic publishing, journal editors, non-publication, peer-reviewed journals, publication

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Introduction

The origin of the popular saying that academics must ‘publish or perish’ has been traced to a 1942 book by American sociologist Logan Wilson (Garfield, 1996: 11). While, at the time it was coined, the expression was generally interpreted as a somewhat tongue-in-cheek description of how to advance an academic career, today it is a blunt statement of the reality of professional life for most academics in most parts of the world. Publication in peer-reviewed journals is the life-blood of academic existence. Careers rise or fall and reputations flourish or flounder on the strength of such publication. The best journals are ‘vehicles of scholarly communication where the latest thinking and research can be disseminated, discussed and reviewed, to and by others in the same field’ (Bence and Oppenheim, 2004: 63). Journals are the primary means of communicating findings to other researchers, engaging in focused theoretical discussion (Lundin et al., 2010: 309), and defining ‘the resources readers may use not only in citing existing work, but also in designing their own future studies’ (Roth, 2006: 215). Journals are also a vital force in shaping individual careers because ‘(H)iring, advancement, and reputation in the university setting have traditionally depended on a scholar’s work as judged by his or her colleagues’ (Hogler and Gross, 2009: 107).

The ‘university setting’ has changed dramatically in recent years, as demands from university administrations for academic staff to publish more – and more – have been accompanied by pressure (often from those same administrators) to undertake more – and more – traditionally non-academic tasks. As Hil has pointed out, the contemporary university has fallen victim to ‘commercialisation, managerialism, corporate governance and other outgrowths of neo-liberal ideology’ accompanied by ‘bureaucratic practices and corporate jargon common to other sectors – inputs, outputs, targets, key performance indicators, performance management, unit costs, cost effectiveness, benchmarking, quality assurance, and so on’ (2012: 10). These trends have also affected scholarly journals, which have been buffeted by everything from government efforts to rank them in terms of quality to the imposition by commercial publishers of high fees to access their content. In this environment, being published is far from easy.

Dorothy Bishop has suggested there are three central tensions in academic publishing: who pays to publish research?; who decides what gets published?; and who takes any profits? (2011). The first and last of these questions have attracted considerable attention. For example, in a strongly worded attack on the fees charged by commercial publishers for access to papers published in their journals, George Monbiot (2011) described academic publishers as ‘the most ruthless capitalists in the Western world’ and the fees they charge for access to content as ‘a tax on education, a stifling of the public mind’. And in an article in *The Observer* newspaper, John Naughton condemned the way in which ‘unconscionable amounts of public money are extracted from our hapless universities in the form of what are, effectively, monopoly rents for a few publishers’ (2012). This situation has triggered a groundswell of resistance to commercial academic publishing and in favour of open access publication, which has been described as an ‘academic spring’, alluding to the ‘Arab Spring’ that brought widespread regime change to countries in the Arab world in 2010–2011 (Jha, 2012). However, observers (Fontein, 2012) have noted that open access may also bring detrimental consequences to academic work in Africa and other regions of the Global South. These concerns include the high costs to university budgets and the exclusive access to publication that such a model may entail. The

fear is that the 'author pays' model of open access may 'amplify and exacerbate' existing global academic hierarchies and exclusions by making publishing research 'more exclusive and privileged' (2012). The digital divide that puts African universities at a disadvantage in comparison with their counterparts in the North is also likely to limit the success of open access initiatives in Africa (Möller, 2007: 17).

The second question – who decides what gets published? – has received less attention. While the answer would seem to be obvious – journal editors and the reviewers who assess submitted material – surprisingly little research has been devoted to these characters who play such a central role. Yet journal editors are a varied group and journal editing is an inexact craft which requires a 'conscientious understanding of the aims of the journal, a conscientious selection of minimal criteria for sending a paper out for review, a conscientious selection of referees, a conscientious decision as to how to evaluate referees' reports, and a conscientious decision about whether to accept or reject refereed submissions' (Corlett, 2008: 208). Differences between editors mean they don't necessarily exercise the same level of conscientiousness in relation to these considerations and, indeed, there are variations in how different editors view the world and their journal's place in it.

This essay reports a pilot project which set out to shed some light on these views. As editors of two reasonably prominent peer-reviewed journals in the fields of journalism studies and journalism – *Australian Journalism Review* and *Ecquid Novi: African Journalism Studies* – the authors initially drew on their own experience to identify common issues facing journal editors. These can be grouped into four broad categories. One is the quality and quantity of submissions, and includes such questions as whether the topic dealt with in a submitted paper is relevant and the content of sufficient quality to justify review. A second category covers refereeing, and includes issues around reviewer selection, expertise, consistency and reliability as well as rejection rates. The third grouping focuses on authors and authorship, and includes plagiarism, copyright and correspondence (for example, in relation to paper rejection). Finally, there are those issues which fall under the umbrella of publication and circulation, such as readership, funding, editorial boards, legal matters, database access and dealing with commercial publishers.

Any or all of these issues can influence what is eventually published. Combined, they contextualise an additional issue, the implications of which have only recently begun to be understood. This is the fact that the overwhelming preponderance of journal articles published in the academic world are written by authors from the Global North (Europe and North America) and relatively few by authors from the Global South (Latin America, Asia, Africa and Oceania). There are many possible explanations for this pattern of publication. It could indicate that more papers are written and submitted from authors in the Global North, or that papers from the South are generally of poorer quality, or that too many of their authors ignore academic conventions. Or it could be an inescapable product of the geo-political realities of contemporary global wealth and power. At the level of the individual, it is easier for an author 'to assume that a rejection letter represents a country of origin bias rather than reflecting flaws in the actual research' (Kulik, 2005: 162). For obvious reasons, too, many academics ground their work in situations with which they are most familiar, and this frequently produces material which is extremely local. While what is 'local' means different things to different people, academic authors in countries where 'local' could mean London or Paris or New York are much more

likely to be able to present their work as 'international' than someone in Phnom Penh or Pago Pago.

Having said that, however, it is important to understand that there are deeper forces at work. 'Global South' is not simply a geographic description or a euphemism for underdevelopment. Rather, the term 'references an entire history of colonialism, neo-imperialism, and differential economic and social change through which large inequalities in living standards, life expectancy, and access to resources are maintained' (Dados and Connell, 2012: 13). The effect is that most academic authors located in the Global South have to contend with obstacles which are unknown in the North, such as minimal access to computers, inadequate infrastructure, frequent power blackouts, physical danger and political instability. Life is far from easy when, as Carol Pearce has observed of academic life in Africa:

... you work in a university with a less-than-adequate library and if you are demoralised by a low salary and a lack of basic equipment such as a computer (even typing skills are rare among scholars), with disaffected students who seem to be constantly at war with the university authorities or the state. (2003: 56)

The structural imbalances between the means to scholarly production in the North and the South mean that 'local [African] scholars experience considerable difficulty when they attempt to intersect with international scholarly networks' (Möller, 2007: 17). The view exists that manuscripts from Africa are 'routinely rejected' by journals based in the North because the lack of access to the latest publications meant that they appeared to present 'outdated concepts and arguments' (2007: 17). It is still an open question whether alternative models of publication, like open access, would ameliorate this situation. On the whole, production, distribution and dissemination of scholarly research remains skewed towards the North, with African scholars remaining largely in the role of consumers of research (Le Roux and Nwosu, 2006: 2). Attempts by major publishers to accommodate African researchers through such developments as co-publishing agreements with local publishers (for example, Taylor and Francis's arrangement with Unisa Press in South Africa) or special terms of access to journals for African researchers are laudable, but can at most mitigate an unequal system.

Some argue that this skewed picture is not only the result of structural factors like access to computers or literature, but, perhaps more importantly, is due to epistemological and methodological biases that continue to marginalise scholars from the South (and within the South, further discriminate, for instance against black women [Sithole, 2009]) from publication through the way that practices like peer-review are set up. Southern journals also remain marginalised through the mechanisms of scholarly recognition such as indexes (Le Roux and Nwosu, 2006: 2). The distinction between North and South is furthermore not only a simple matter of geography, but of alignment to different schools of thought. Sithole (2009: 2), for example, argues that western models of knowledge still dominate scholarly models in South Africa to the extent that African approaches are discouraged. Whether we agree or disagree with the specifics of these arguments, it is clear that knowledge production is linked to issues of power, control and access (Le Roux and Nwosu, 2006: 2).

The researchers' approach to this project was informed by perspectives acquired from the personal experience of their own global positioning. One edits a journal based in the Global South, and as such is familiar with the plight of academics based there. The other is based in Australia which, although economically and politically part of the Global North, is so geographically distant from the metropolitan centres of the USA and Europe that many Australian and New Zealand academics feel they are living on the periphery. Despite the wonders of the internet and modern communication, it is not uncommon for them to experience a sense of isolation from their colleagues in the northern hemisphere. In many cases, this translates into a feeling that they are the 'poor cousins' when it comes to having papers accepted for publication in journals based in the North. Such feelings are exacerbated by a lingering inheritance from colonial days which has contributed to the persistence of what is known colloquially as the 'cultural cringe', represented by on-going debates about whether local journals are as 'good' as 'international' journals, and whether the latter are really only the northern hemisphere's version of 'local' journals anyway.

The study

A qualitative study was considered well suited to obtaining greater understanding of how journal editors see their role and how they respond to the various issues of editorship outlined earlier. Given the widely disparate locations and variable accessibility of journal editors in different parts of the world, it was decided to administer an online questionnaire in the expectation that responses to questions about key aspects of editorship would highlight areas for further exploration and provide a basis for a more extensive investigation later. While acknowledging that the limitations of online questionnaires are also a limitation of the study, the researchers considered that the data obtained was relevant and insightful, and provides a firm foundation for a larger project.

They drew up a list of 24 major journals in communication, journalism and journalism studies. Contact details for the editors were acquired via journal websites and, following the granting of research ethics approval, all editors received an initial email in mid-2012 informing them of the project and inviting them to participate. Those who accepted the invitation received the online questionnaire a few days later. For various reasons six editors were not able to participate and seven did not reply. A total of 11 editors responded and completed the questionnaire. Although some were less concerned than others to retain their anonymity, the conditions of research ethics approval required that no participants could be identified.

The questions in the editors' questionnaire were as follows:

1. What do you see as the primary role of your journal?
2. Who is your primary audience? How do you know?
3. How do you select referees? What are the main issues around refereeing?
4. What is the current rejection rate for your journal? Are there any consistent patterns in the papers rejected in terms of authors' disciplinary, institutional, geographic, educational backgrounds?

5. Do you consider it is important for a journal to be ‘international’ in scope of content, representation on the editorial board and the breadth of its audience? If so, could you clarify what you mean by ‘international’?
6. Do you think the national origin of a paper has an influence on how you assess it – for instance, would you try to appoint reviewers from the same country or region as the author?
7. Do you think there are certain ‘universal’ standards of peer-review that can apply to papers regardless of their country or region of origin?
8. Do you make a special effort to publish papers from under-represented regions in the South/ periphery? Why/why not?
9. Do you think that the commercial nature of many international academic publishers limits the participation of scholars in the South in global debates, or do they provide a global platform for under-represented regions?
10. Any other comments?

Findings

What do you see as the primary role of your journal?

Three consistent themes ran through editors’ responses to this question. These were: to generate dialogue between scholars, and between scholars, practitioners and trainers/educators; to contribute to critical thinking and expand theory-building by stimulating and promoting disciplinary debates; and to improve professional practice. Most emphasised the importance of their journal’s role in providing a public space for conversation about scholarly research. While this platform was seen primarily as serving academics, some considered that it was also a way for practitioners to keep abreast of research trends. With regard to professional practice, especially in the case of journalism, the view was expressed that journals could perform an educational function by, for example, delivering ‘challenging and relevant teaching materials for use on a range of journalism programmes’. Although this question did not prompt editors to reflect on their role in geographical terms, three respondents mentioned specifically that they consider the aim of their journal is to contribute to dialogue, debate and dissemination of research in their particular regions. Further, where the geographical contexts of the debates to be stimulated were mentioned, these were all in the Global South (Asia and South Africa). In one case, too, the response suggested that the editor saw the role of the journal specifically in international terms: ‘To contribute to critical thinking about international and comparative communication research.’

Who is your primary audience? How do you know?

Most responses to this question identified academics and non-academic researchers, sometimes including postgraduate students and policy-makers, as their primary readership. Some editors pointed to the distinction between readership and focus of content: for example, several remarked that while his/her journal had a particular regional focus, their readership was presumed to be international because the journal is included on

international databases and library lists. It should be noted, however, that readership is notoriously difficult, if not impossible, to pinpoint as, in an online environment where access to articles is easier than ever, formal subscription lists reveal only a very small part of the readership story.

How do you select referees? What are the main issues around refereeing?

The double emphasis of journals that are focused on a specific region in terms of content, but with an increasingly international readership as a result of globalized distribution networks, raises questions around the selection of referees. When asked how they chose referees, editors generally acknowledged the importance of regional knowledge, although the small pools of referees available regionally were frequently remarked upon. A combination of experts in regional areas as well as international referees appeared to be used in most cases. One editor expanded on his/her strategy to straddle the regional/international foci by explaining that if a submission focuses on a particular national or regional area, one reviewer with expertise in the same country/region is selected, and one who is not an expert on the same region: 'The former can then check the specifics of the argument while the latter can comment on whether the author has explained the detail of the case study to a novice reader.' Although editors generally relied on the expertise and competence of a pool of reviewers built up over the years, and expressed their gratitude for the effort put in by them, the ability to find a sufficient number of referees able to provide constructive comments under time pressure, in a context where submissions continue to expand, was remarked upon by several editors. The pressures of time and workload in a publication environment that continues to grow and proliferate raise questions about the extent to which editors are able to seek out reviewers in under-represented areas of study and marginalised parts of the world. How these differences in referees' disciplinary, institutional, geographic and educational backgrounds are reflected in the rejection rate of journals remains an open question.

What is the current rejection rate for your journal? Are there any consistent patterns in the papers rejected in terms of authors' disciplinary, institutional, geographic, educational backgrounds?

Several editors see rejection as unrelated to geographical origin of the submission, stating that these submissions are rejected on the basis of common errors such as an inappropriate choice of journal, incoherent argument and lack of new insights. It is, however, common for accepted submissions also to go through several rounds of revision. While some editors consider that there are 'no institutional, geographic or educational barriers' to acceptance, and that 'only academic merit counts', there are some indications that more rejections come from 'overseas' (which, due to the anonymity of the survey, means anywhere outside the journal's location). One (presumably South African) editor remarked that 'there are no discernable trends within South Africa, but generally

submissions from the rest of Africa and India have quality issues'. A useful distinction between 'rejection' and 'non-submission' was made by one editor:

The difficulty I have had with securing scholarly work exploring certain areas of the field is not with rejection rates but with non-submission of work. I fear that the global political economy of tertiary education and publishing means that access is denied much earlier down the chain. As an editor, I experience this as non-submission. It is very rare for me to receive papers from certain regions/countries. Do I need to spell them out? African countries; the non-Israeli Middle East; Bangladesh; many of the new Central European democracies, although this is changing. I receive too few submissions from practitioner journalists; or papers about diversity issues, disability and sexual orientation.

This suggests that the global political economy of publication not only impacts on the quality of the work received by journals, but skews the whole process of writing, submission and review away from the Global South. The extent to which this situation applies to journals in general can only be conjectured, but in the light of responses on the whole, one could surmise that the distribution of such 'non-submission' would apply to other journals as well.

Do you consider it is important for a journal to be 'international' in scope of content, representation on the editorial board and the breadth of its audience? If so, could you clarify what you mean by 'international'?

This asymmetrical distribution of submissions notwithstanding, most editors were quick to characterize their journals as 'international' in scope of content, representation on the editorial board and the breadth of readership. The international dimension was generally seen as important, especially with regard to authors, reviewers and editorial board members. One editor stated that journals should 'try with all (their) might to secure submissions from all parts of the globe', both in terms of the national origins of the author and the focus of the submissions. Structuring the journal's editorial board in an internationally representative way, designating special issues to international topics and making use of the communication possibilities that new technologies afford were seen as strategies to achieve this goal of internationalisation.

Some respondents, however, made a distinction between having international representation on the editorial board, and retaining a space for journals that are regionally focused in terms of their subject matter. One editor remarked:

We do like to include 'international' scholars on our editorial board but this is to broaden the representation of disciplinary knowledge and not because we believe that they afford us a better standing. I believe there is too much focus on ISI accreditation and that there are many good quality journals without it.

Another linked international representation to quality assurance, while indicating that content could remain oriented towards local, regional or even community topics:

How do you define international or how can it be defined? But no, of primary importance is relevance to the field of inquiry and after that geographical relevance for South Africa (with the rest of Africa gaining increasing importance). It is important to have an international board (with increasingly members from Africa) that can monitor the quality and value of the journal in terms of international standards. The journal's audience (market) has always been primarily South African and increasingly African.

But inclusion and representativity, while viewed as important in the era of globalization, were also seen in broader terms than geographical focus alone. One editor specifically pointed to the continued under-representation of 'women's scholarship' in the field.

Do you think the national origin of a paper has an influence on how you assess it – for instance, would you try to appoint reviewers from the same country or region as the author?

There was some variation in the editors' responses to this question. While several indicated that reviewers are selected on the basis of their 'track record' in the given topic area, others stated that they try to match manuscripts with reviewers in specific locations. Of course, the topic of an article and the origin of the author and reviewer can overlap, so this distinction does not always hold. As one editor pointed out, the origin of an author might not be relevant if the topic is not geographically specific. Several editors indicated they had specific strategies for dealing with manuscripts from outside their own geographic region. One stated: 'I have a strong bias in favour of international manuscripts. In fact, I may cut them too much slack.' Others indicated that they would seek at least one reviewer from the same geographical area as the author and topic of the essay (although these may, of course, differ). One editor made clear that finding reviewers who are specialists in the country in question would be in line with a general approach to sensitivity and rigour in reviewing practices:

I believe that all papers should receive equally sensitive and rigorous review. In all cases I try to identify relevant and expert reviewers. A paper from Africa would be allocated three reviewers who are specialist in the African country which is the focus of the paper. And certainly at least one reviewer would be from the country which is the focus of study for the paper.

Do you think there are certain 'universal' standards of peer-review that can apply to papers regardless of their country or region of origin?

Responses varied in regard to this question. Some respondents pointed to criteria that are shared across fields, such as 'Justification', 'Objectives', 'Detailed methods/procedures', 'Analysis', 'Discussion', and whether 'papers contribute "new insights to old issues" in "succinct and clear language devoid of convoluted academic obfuscations"'. Other criteria listed by editors who believed in universal standards for publication included 'strong conceptual framing', 'methodological rigour', 'strong/interesting findings or argument', and – perhaps of importance in an increasingly competitive and crowded publication

landscape – whether a submission would be of interest to readers: ‘Something which is original, quirky, engaging and interesting to read/thought provoking.’ At the same time, other editors rejected the notion of universal standards. Even when they stated that they applied basic criteria for good academic writing, these editors emphasised innovative approaches, relevance to the field and subject-specific expertise, while one who adhered to universal standards indicated he/she made exceptions for submissions ‘which demand specific cultural knowledge’. One editor warned that ‘to universalise implies to instrumentalise, to homogenise, and to remove editorial discretion’. Thus it would seem that, although editors might agree on basic, generic criteria for good quality work, specifics of the discipline, cultural context and editorial preferences are often taken into account.

Do you make a special effort to publish papers from under-represented regions in the South/ periphery? Why/why not?

Although several editors emphasised basic standards that apply across geographic regions and cultures, there was wide agreement that a special effort should be made to publish papers from under-represented regions in the Global South. The political economy of research and publishing was mentioned as a reason why authors from the South might get more intensive feedback from an editor in order to make their papers publishable:

Yes (a special effort is made), specially with contributors from less developed countries where library and internet access to current literature is lacking. Where papers on topics specific to the periphery deserve a space, contributors are guided by me as editor through a process to rewrite the paper to a level that is reviewable.

A similar response from another editor cited ‘developmental reasons’ behind a special attempt made to give such articles exposure. Several editors highlighted the skewed playing field of global scholarly publishing, which is biased towards editors in the North, as a justification for having to make an effort to ‘offer a channel for authors whose location puts them at a disadvantage vis-a-vis the metropolitan centres of publication’, as one editor put it.

Another editor agreed that the global scholarly context is unfavourable towards scholars from the Global South, but cautioned against a simplistic view of commercial publishers as the culprit, instead saying that the causes for these inequalities have deep historical roots:

Yes, (such an effort) ... is important. Plurality is not merely a virtue but a necessity to the conduct of fulsome debate. It is absolutely necessary to admit as many voices as possible into the debating chamber. But this is not a level playing field to shift the metaphor and some voices (significant voices) are too muted by circumstances of the global distribution of certain resources and the organisation of publishing in the developed north. But as I mentioned above, the problems here are deep seated and as an editor I am struck by how little material is submitted from certain parts of the world. I think I understand the part which colonial legacies play here, but the publishers are less the demons of this morality play than those of us who have not found ways to encourage authors to submit.

For some editors 'special effort' means to 'make a special effort to attract international manuscripts', as long as these 'meet our publication criteria'. Still others indicated that they will make no special effort to find or publish articles from the South, for example:

(We) have no ideals and/or ambitions to 'find' articles where they do not exist. If it is a topic that could contribute to the establishment and development of the discipline in an under-represented region or the under-represented region's development, and if it complies with the standards of the journal, it will be published.

One editor responded briefly, stating that 'only academic merit counts'. These replies raise a question about what 'merit' is being applied to articles, and how journal 'standards' are being applied to submissions outside the journal's immediate geographical or disciplinary environment.

Do you think that the commercial nature of many international academic publishers limits the participation of scholars in the South in global debates, or do they provide a global platform for under-represented regions?

Issues of inequality in the global academic publishing environment are closely linked to views about the role that commercial scholarly publishers play in the global research environment. These viewpoints were probed in the final question of the survey. There was a shared understanding among editors of the complexities and paradoxes that global commercial scholarly publishing houses play. While those publishers were seen to 'understandably look at the bottom line in deciding what and who to publish', there was also a recognition of the efforts such publishers are making to promote scholars and topics from the Global South; for instance by linking with regional publishers (e.g. Unisa Press in South Africa). Another editor cautioned against simplistic views of commercial publishers as good or bad:

Well, certainly those scholars who have signed the pledge against Elsevier think so (that the commercial nature of these publications limits the participation of scholars from the South). But in truth I'm not happy with manichaeistic options. In the digital age we should be able to organise publishing in ways which allow us to enjoy the benefits of space and pace which digital publishing potentially offers and not by forming soviets but by working with publishers who are trying to find ways (some of them) towards a business model which allows a lower cost access.

One editor reluctantly agreed that these publishers provide an international platform, but immediately pointed to its limitations: 'There is a global platform but only in a limited sense. As online access improves and expands the virtual journal may be the way to go.' Some editors, however, emphasised the cost of getting published as 'prohibitive' (these responses seemed to refer to access to these journals rather than the cost of research in the South more generally). One editor highlighted the issue of language: 'I believe

Southern authors are more constrained by their mastery of English as an international language in the global discourse.’ The linguistic aspects of international publication were, however, not probed in these questions.

Conclusion

The pilot study reported here set out to shed light on the views of journal editors in the fields of journalism and journalism studies towards their role, and towards some of the more contentious issues affecting this role. Despite the limitations of the study, the responses received suggest that, while there is a considerable divergence of views, on many points there is widespread agreement.

Among the latter are editors’ views of the primary role of their journals. Responses received indicated that they are all very aware of the vital role their journals play as vehicles of scholarly communication. The three consistent themes running through responses were to generate dialogue between scholars, and between scholars, practitioners and trainers/educators; to contribute to critical thinking and expand theory-building; and to improve professional practice. All editors appeared to be well aware of the need for quality refereeing, and – encouragingly for those who submit papers to them – to be universally concerned to ensure that papers are reviewed fairly and competently. At the same time, they acknowledge that, for a variety of reasons, it is not always easy to recruit competent referees with appropriate expertise to assess all papers in a timely fashion.

The most significant divergence among the editors’ views was in relation to the notions of ‘international’ and ‘universal’, and in particular whether the same standards should apply to all submissions. While there was widespread acknowledgement that some topics are universal by definition and that some areas of the world are under-represented in terms of publication, there was no common agreement as to how editors should respond to this situation. Some consider that all papers should be treated equally, regardless of author origin, while others feel that special allowance should be made for authors from the South because of the great difficulties under which most are forced to labour.

In the view of the authors of this essay, publication – or, rather, non-publication – of papers authored in the Global South is the most contentious issue raised in this study, and the one most likely to become politicised in future. More than a decade ago James Curran and Myung-Jin Park condemned what they described as ‘the self-absorption and parochialism of much Western media theory’ (2000: 3). Although what has been described as ‘the new inclusiveness’ (Joseph, 2005: 588) has since modified this parochialism, much western media theory continues to be focused on North America and Western Europe. And if this distorted focus afflicts much theory, then it continues to be evident in many of the publications in which this theory is expressed. With several notable exceptions, the most prestigious academic journals across the broad spectrum of communication, journalism and journalism studies continue to be positioned along an American–Western European axis; indeed, many are located even more narrowly, being firmly within the English-speaking section of that axis.

As indicated earlier, there are many reasons for this situation, and it would be unreasonable – and wrong – to blame journal editors for it. As responses obtained in the study reported here indicate, journal editors in our field are well aware of this and many are

taking steps to alleviate or minimise its impact. This is significant because in the world of scholarly publishing as currently structured, academics in a vast section of the globe suffer a form of disenfranchisement. This is unfair on them, and denies our discipline many of the insights and much of the vibrancy that the best of them are able to contribute. However, it seems clear that these problems are systemic and structural, and concomitantly require holistic approaches that go beyond the good intentions and well-meaning attempts of individual editors. Having said that, and despite the limitations of this study, the responses received suggest that journal editors are not only conversant with a plethora of complicated and vexing problems, but also have developed a range of successful strategies for responding to them. Given their position at the centre of the vortex which is contemporary academic publishing, this is good news indeed.

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