PUBLISH OR PERISH: SCHOLARLY PUBLISHING CHALLENGES IN AFRICA

Leila Bellour [1]

1 Department of Foreign Languages, University Center of Mila, Algeria

Email: leila_bellour@hotmail.com

Abstract

Researchers are judged by their scholarly publishing and the quality of the journals where they publish their manuscripts. Academic publishing is very essential for their promotion and the university's accreditation. The terrible reality is that academic research and publishing do not conform to the high standards. Thus, compared with their Western counterparts, the African universities are lagging behind. My paper evinces the problems encountered by researchers in their academic research and the factors that challenge scholarly publishing. This topic is worth dwelling on because it may hold the solutions to the problems of scholarly publishing in Africa. The paper ends with some suggestions and recommendations for improving the quality of academic research and publishing.

Keywords: High ranking journal; reviewing; scholarly publishing

1.   Introduction

Because academic publishing defines them, Academics are very much obsessed with publications because they bring status and promotion for the teacher. Sarker states that

> [p]ublishing in highly reputed journals is now an imperative for many scholars in order to progress in their academic careers. Many PhD programs are requiring their students to publish in high- quality journals as part of the program. In the recruitment process for starting academic positions (assistant professor, lecturer, etc.), an increasing number of research- oriented universities around the globe are favorably considering candidates only if they have publications in top- tier journals, or, at the very least, if the candidates can demonstrate their ability to publish work in such journals (2015, p.192).

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[1] Corresponding author: Leila Bellour/ https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9399-9594

Scholarly publishing also helps promote the status of the university. In addition to that, publications might bring personal bliss if they contribute to knowledge in a particular field. In fact, one might say that publications are one's passport to the world. Publishing is important for asserting oneself in the academia. If one cannot publish, he will perish and will never attain any status either in the university or in the academic community in general. Though it is the only means of surviving and thriving in the academic milieu, where survival is for top-notch scholars, being a published scholar is not easy. It is a tough business full of hardships and difficulties. The latter include a variety of factors some of which are related to the quality of the published paper, but there are others that are imposed by some agents and by the scientific environment, and these are most of the time beyond the ability of the researcher to manage.

2. The Problems Encountered by Researchers in their Academic Research

2.1. Research Methodology

By and large, if the paper has merits, it is likely to be published. To get their papers published, academics should learn the methodology of scientific research paper. There some differences between academic papers across different disciplines, but generally speaking, they have the following structure:

a-Title: The title tells the reader what the paper is about, and it should be conveyed in few words. Hartley maintains that a "good title should attract and inform the readers and be accurate. It needs to stand out in some way from the other thousands of titles that compete for the readers' attention"(2008, p.23).

b-Abstract: The abstract is of great significance because it sums up the work of the author, and it appears in various abstracting and indexing services related to the journal. Abstracts always tell the reader about the subject of the paper, the methodology, the findings, the implications, and the conclusion. Among the things that the abstract should include, according to Thyer, are:

> the issue or problem under investigation […] the research method […] the results […] the conclusions and any applications to practice"(41). Abstracts are sometimes referred to as "structured abstracts" because they have a basis structure. In other words, "Structured abstracts are typically written using five sub-headings-'background, ''aim', 'method', 'results', and 'conclusion''(2008, p.147).

Word limits for abstracts set by journals usually range between 100 and 300, and the most common length is between 150 and 250.

c- Keywords: The key words are stated at the end of the abstract. They help the reader know the content of the paper, and they help researchers who are interested in the same subject to find the article in the internet. According to Olson, "in today's world of digital publication in which journal articles are available worldwide via the internet, some might argue that a paper's keywords are even more important than a paper's title" (2014, p.87). In high-quality journals, the key words are used in indexing and abstracting.

d- Introduction: The introduction introduces the subject of the paper. It takes the shape of a funnel in the sense that it moves from the more general to the more specific. The introduction states the main problem of the paper and how the author will tackle it.

e- Literature review: In the literature review, the researcher refers to the works that are related to his subject. This is very important, because it shows his familiarity with the subject and that he is very knowledgeable about it. The literature review, significantly, shows how the researcher's work differs from those that have been done on the same subject. That is, it

evinces the originality of the researcher's work and in which way his paper makes a significant contribution to the field. In the review of the literature, the researcher should always cite works that are relevant, and it is preferable to cite those which are up-to-date. After referring to these works, the author should illustrate the position of his article in relation to the ongoing debates on that subject.

f- Method: The methodology section evinces how the study was conducted. The researcher must choose the right method that supports or tests his hypothesis. In some research papers, "method sections are usually subdivided […] into three sections: 1-Participants, 2-measures, 3-procedur(s)" (Hartley, 2008, p. 45). The author needs to explain the reason why he chooses a certain method.

g- Results: In this section, the researcher demonstrates the main and subsidiary findings, and he relates them to the hypothesis and method he has used.

h- Discussion: The discussion section should not just show the results obtained by the researcher. Its aim is to interpret and comment on the findings. According to Thyer, "the discussion section should summarize the results and state whether or not the pattern of hypothesis was corroborated or disconfirmed […] The discussion should also include a dispassionate review of the limitations of your study" (2008, p.57). Discussions, as Hartley maintains, include the following moves:

Move 1: restate the findings and accomplishments.

Move 2: Evaluate how the results fit in with the previous findings-do they contradict, qualify, agree or go beyond them?

Move 3: List potential limitations to the study.

Move 4: Offer an interpretation/expectation of these results and ward off counter-claims.

Move 5: State the implications and recommend further research (Hartley, 2008, p. 49).

i- Conclusion: The conclusion should be related to the main findings and results. It is not supposed to include any discussions and comments. According to Kitchin, and Fuller, the "conclusion brings the article to a close by summarizing the rationale and findings, reaffirming how the research advances understanding and knowledge, and outlining how future studies could build and extend the research and argument reported"(2005, p.43).

2.2. Some Criteria of Good Research

In addition to the components that are mentioned above, a good scholarly paper, in items of language, should be objective and impersonal. Authors should also use a style and a language that are not obscure because their aim is to communicate and transfer the information to others. In this regard, Lichtfouse writes: "In general, some authors write as if their subject matter is obvious to the reader. However, a research article is a means of communication. Articles that do not communicate their message to a wide audience are not read and therefore not cited" (2013, p.25). Some papers are rejected because they are poorly written.

One of the most important characteristics of research papers is originality. The researcher should bring something new that drips into the pot of knowledge. Some papers are not accepted for publication, because they tackle subjects that have already been digested before.

After submitting their papers, the latter will be evaluated on the basis of some criteria. The following figure demonstrates an example of these evaluation forms.

Please, rate the paper as follows:	GOOD	AVERAGE	POOR
Strength of supporting data/evidence	------	-------	-----
Originality of ideas and approach	------	---------	-----
Significance of topic	------	-------	-------
Completeness of discussion	------	-------	--------
Quality of Writing	------	-------	--------
Intelligibility to non-specialists	-----	------	-------

RECOMMENDATIONS

Accept--------------- Accept with minor revisions----------

Re-submit after major revisions-------------------- Reject------------

COMMENTS

Please add any comments for the editor here:

COMMENTS FOR THE AUTHORS: Please, type comments for the authors on a separate page

3. Other Factors that Challenge Scholarly Publishing

One should find the right place where to publish his papers, because journals are not hospitable to all kinds of writing. Publishers must be familiar with the journals in the fields of their research, and they should try to soak up their characteristics. According to Olson, the author needs " to choose a journal that is appropriate for […] work»(2014, p.11). Before sending his paper, the author must target the journal that fits his work. He should read about the scope of the journal, because if the paper does not meet the interests of the journal, it will be rejected. Indeed, there are some journals that limit themselves not just to particular themes but also to specific approaches. A novice academic might ask some colleagues or some experts he knows about journals that might be a good fit for his paper. Alternatively, before submitting his paper, the author might contact the editor and ask if his paper will be accepted to be considered for possible publication. Interestingly, the choice of the journal is also determined by the quality of one's paper. For instance, a great paper should be submitted to high ranked journals whereas papers of lower quality are better to be sent to lower ranked journals. In addition to the good choice of the journal, it is important for the scholar to learn about the journal guidelines and the author instructions before submitting the manuscript.

Before sending their papers for journals, authors have to consider the pecking order or hierarchy of journals. Authors should submit their papers to high status academic journals that publish papers of the highest quality. Some scholars care more about the quantity rather than

the quality of publications though publishing one article in a highly rated journal is much better than publishing many articles in second-or third-rate journals.

The best journals are those which have a high citation index. These first-tier journals have low acceptance rates. According to Wensley, "the higher-quality journals may well have longer turnaround times, have reviewers who are less tolerant of less polished papers, and, inevitably have much higher rejection rates" (2015, p.182). In the same vein, Sarker writes: "Leading journals tend to have high standards, with reviewers and editors often demanding unreasonable levels of theoretical and methodological sophistication, scale of the study, and contributions" (2015, p.192).

Authors must understand how journals are ranked, because this is very important for their promotion. The best journals are those which have an impact factor. The latter is a citation-based measurement used to measure the scholarly influence of academic journals. Craig and Ferguson state that the "Impact Factor is a measure of the average number of citations to the articles contained within a given journal" (2009, p.165). Thyer, in turn, points out that the Impact Factor is

> a rather simple descriptive statistic calculated by a database called the Web of Science (WOS) (also known as the Journal Citation Reports), and it refers to the extent to which an article appearing in a given journal is likely to be cited anywhere in the journal literature within 2 years of original article's appearance in print. This includes citations not just in the journal in which the article was published but in any journals published during the next two years (2008, p.23).

According to Murray, information about the journal, "particularly journal impact factors and citations of articles, is now routinely included in an academic's curriculum vitae. Where previously it was enough simply to list your publications, it is now important to include these measures of your publications' impact on your field" (2009, p.42). For a paper to be accepted in a high ranked journal, it should original. In other words, it should add to the existing stock of knowledge, and it should also be well written.

Unfortunately, some journals with an impact factor tend to publish for academics who are already established in the field. That's why some novice researchers, particularly PhD students, always list the names of their supervisors on the paper, because they are more standing in the field though these supervisors have not contributed to the paper. In this regard, Hengl and Gould state:

> In many cases, a person listed as a co-author does not actually know much about the paper and would not be able to defend its content or reproduce it from scratch. Obviously, Phoney co-authors are listed because of the benefits of getting published. In principle, there are two types of Phoney authors: (a) those who use their position and funds to make colleagues list them as co-authors and (b) those who trade authorship among themselves. The latter is less serious and can be summarized as: 'put me on your paper and I will put you on my papers so we both get two' (2006, p.12).

Phoney co-authors cannot be considered as authors because they do not contribute physically and intellectually to the content of the paper, and they have not invested their time in it. Phoney co-authors are parasites, and their practice is immoral.

In highly ranked international journals, editors select reviewers who are qualified enough to evaluate the papers objectively and adequately. Mansour states that "peer reviewing process guarantees the academic standard. An academic journal gains good standing and a reputation for excellence in scholarly communication by publishing high-quality articles"

(2016, p.416). To get published, all papers need the stamp of approval from the reviewers who help the editor make a final decision whether the paper will be published or not. Peer reviewing is very important for promoting the quality of the journal by selecting only the high quality papers for publication.

Another defect of the African journals is that some of them do not have a website. Journals of high quality have a website, which makes the journal accessible to all scholars all over the world. Having a website is likely to increase the reputation of the journal and the rate of submissions. In this context, Thyer writes: "If a journal is not indexed and cited, then it pretty much exists only in hard copy, and this makes it very unlikely that scholars using the Internet and/or electronic databases will ever encounter (and cite) it" (2008, p.21). The visibility of the journal in digital form is likely to increase its readership and promote its ranking. Smart points out that the "lack of knowledge about online publishing is preventing many journals from going online, and others have extremely poorly constructed websites, often embedded within their institution site and not discoverable through the major search engines. Inevitably, this means that full advantage of what online publishing can offer is not yet realized" (2009, p.288). Local journals are unlikely to be of high status. Hengl and Gould state that papers "in what we call local journals are either not accessible to a wider audience or the review process is 'too soft'" (2006, p.9). In fact, there are international development agencies that provide free help for local African journals. Bioline (www.bioline.org.br), for instance, enables journals to publish full-text online open access. It is based in Toronto (Canada).

Though the rejection rate is generally low in some African journals in which the review process is very soft, it is very important to know why a paper might be rejected by a journal. One reason is that the paper is not good fit for the journal. That's why the author should learn about the aims and the scope of the journal before sending his paper for evaluation. Some papers might be rejected because they haven't followed the journals' guidelines. According to Windsor, one of the reasons of being rejected by a journal is "Inadequate manuscript preparation, in terms of format and style" (2015, p.84). Some manuscripts might be rejected due to poor writing. To be accepted, the paper should be well written and presented, and it should also conform strictly to the journal's guidelines.

Some journals do not accept some papers because they do not bring any contribution or novel perspective. This is true particularly in the case of Western high ranked journals which reject all papers whose subject has already been well-documented and much discussed. In addition to originality, some papers might be rejected because of methodological reasons. They are free-floating and not anchored in a clear identifiable method or approach.

In high-quality journals, the rate of rejection is high, because some of them see this as a mark of high status. In this regard, Mustafa writes: "More surprisingly, some journals vaunt their high rejection rates as a 'mark of prestige'! […] Rejecting a high percentage of papers became an objective per se for elitist journals to take pride in an artificial elitist club, arguing strangely that a high rejection rate is a gauge of quality. Worse, sometimes rejection decisions are made after long months of waiting" (2015, p.535). Most of the time, papers are rejected by well-established journals because they are not good enough. However, in the local journals, they are easily published. Though they claim to be objective, Western journals are sometimes ethnocentric and biased against non-Western scholars.

Many factors can terribly affect the progress of academics. Papers might be rejected due to unethical practices by some journals. Despite the potential merit of the submitted paper, the latter might be rejected either by the reviewers or the editor for purely personal and subjective reasons that have nothing to do with academic research. Not all African journals

choose the truly meritorious papers for publication. Some of them prioritize authors whom they already know. Those who are unknown, even if they are competent academics, might not have the chance to be published. Bureaucracy and cronyism are very rife in Africa even in the academic sphere. These unethical practices are likely to hamper scientific advancements and make the rank of the journals and the African universities, in general, very low.

In the case of some African journals, some papers are not sent to the right reviewer. However, they do not return the paper to the editor and avow that they do not understand to topic or the methodology used by the author. In Africa, there is also an utter lack of experts in some fields. Thus, some reviewers just make comments on the form of the paper, but they are not really experts in its subject. In this context, Smart states: "Many journal editors will only use referees that they know, and are loath to search indexes to identify specialists in other regions, as many articles require understanding of local systems and knowledge to correctly identify whether the article is important and novel" (2009, p.290). Some of them are so busy that they do not the review process properly. Sometimes, the reviewers take pains to finds faults in the manuscript though it is a good one just to show off. Many reviewers are not very serious in their work because they are not paid. In this context, Hengl and Gould write: "The biggest problem of much scientific journals is that the review process is slow, insufficient, inconsistent, unrepresentative and biased. This is simply because reviewers are not rewarded for their work or evaluated on their performance" (2006, p.15). In fact, this is true only in the case of some African countries, because in Europe and America, reviewers do the review process for free;

> Within some African countries, and some disciplines, there is an expectation of payment by referees, and this cost may be crippling to a journal and lead to minimal reviewing. Paying referees is uncommon within Europe and America, and its existence within certain regions of Africa must be ultimately detrimental to the research community, although it does acknowledge the work required to ensure high-quality content (Smart, 2009, p.290).

Another problem the authors face is the lack of rich areas of expertise. Most of the journals are interdisciplinary and not specialized in a specific research field.

Some journals that are very lax with their team of reviewers might keep the authors in suspense waiting for months or years. In this context, Smart states:

> Many journals have poor author services, and this encourages poor author practices. It can take months (or years) to review papers, and communication with authors is poor, with many journal editors neither informing authors of acceptance nor publication: one result of this is that authors frequently submit to more than one journal at a time to gain the fastest possible publication (2009, p.289).

On the other hand, some journals are not published on time because of the lack of financial support.

Some authors also behave in an unethical way by submitting the same paper to more than one journal. According to Smart, "Several editors report that after they have spent extensive time reviewing and suggesting improvements to an article, the author will then submit it to another title on the basis that it is now more likely to be accepted by the better journal" (2009, p.289). In fact, this is very rare or non-existent in some countries, but some teachers send their papers for more than one journal. One reason for doing this is the fact that some journals take a very long time before making a final decision regarding the paper. Another reason is fear of being rejected after a long time of waiting for the journal's response.

Another problem with the African journals is that editors do not send acknowledgements of receipt and they do not communicate with the authors. Authors often interpret this as a lack of respect for them and for their papers. In sharp contrast with some African, the Western ones generally respond to others' emails and answer their queries promptly.

Sadly, some ambitious academics do not get help and support from others. Boden, Kenway, and Epstein state that one of the reasons for the failure to publish in high quality journals is lack of help from experts. In their words, "some of the more experienced and senior people who should be providing such help simply don't do their job. There are a variety of reasons. It may be because they are selfish with their time and energies" (2007, p.74). In some universities, little guidance is provided on how to publish scholarly papers. Unfortunately, some academics are not collaborative and helpful. Many of them are arrogant, and they won't even respond to one's emails that ask for help or advice. Contrariwise, Western scholars are often very supportive and welcoming. Other researchers refuse to help because they want to remain the only ones in the world of academic publishing.

Unfortunately, some universities do not give training courses on how to write scientific research papers. Also, research methodology is not adequately taught to students. Another major cause of the failure to publish in academic journals is that methodology is not taught adequately at some universities. Many novice researchers do not know how to write an academic research paper. And if they have some knowledge, "they may have a 'knowing-doing gap', whereby they have accumulated the knowledge without developing the practice" (2009, p. Murray 24).

Among the things that restrict the teacher to do research is supervision which is time consuming. Supervising master students is sometimes difficult, because most of the teachers complain about the low level of master students. Murray assumes that some of the factors that prevent someone from being an academic include the lack of time for writing, absence of ambition, fear of rejection, lack of competence in writing, and the prioritization of teaching over academic writing (2009, p.23-4). Murray opines that some academics do not want to play the publication game while others resent giving up so much of their personal time to writing (2009, p.23). Some academics complain that they have little time to write because of personal commitments and responsibilities. Others suffer from the lack of self-confidence and fear of rejection. One should never lose faith in his abilities, because even very good academics have experienced rejection. Thyer states: "Rejection is a fact of life in the world of scholarly publishing. It is painful and it is unpleasant, but it is the price you pay for entering the field and playing the game. In order to score touch-downs, you must take a lot of hits" (2008, p.72).

There are researchers who do not have sufficient time for writing because of enormous teaching loads. Some universities require the teacher to be all the time at the university. In addition to teaching and supervision, teachers are called to go to the university even in the days when they don't have lectures. This is for futile things and for attending meetings that are "a much ado about nothing". Murray quotes an anonymous reviewer who states: "The greatest problem I can see for academics in post is not finding the motivation to write but the time amidst all the pressure and heavy workloads of teaching and administration" (2009, p.34). Along similar lines, Heyden and Vries state: "Teaching often increases the time pressure of researchers because it is so time intensive and there is a large administrative component" (2009, p.351). Some universities even intentionally create many obstacles and impediments for researchers to hinder their progress. Many academics with highly intellectual capacities always try to go abroad where conditions for research are much better. Some universities lack an environment which makes the university teachers more

involved with publishing. In fact, work conditions push the academic to slump into a corner never to get involved in the academia.

Murray identifies some factors that might constitute a stumbling block for successful published authors. According to her, "Unsuccessful colleagues passively or actively loathe or seek to undermine you. Your growing confidence is seen as arrogance. What you write about is devalued in your institution or its relevance to research strategy is questioned" (2009, p.30). Some colleagues do not like others' success. Some universities, unfortunately, is marked by selfishness and envy which often create problems for successful academics.

Many researchers complain about the utter lack of documents and references in the area of their research. And this constitutes a real obstacle against academic research and disenables them to keep pace with the current advancements in their research areas. This also makes it impossible for them to use up-to-date references in the literature review, which results in dismissing their work as outmoded. Sadly, some universities do not have access to top scholarly journals because they have not subscribed to them. Western referees, in their reports, sometimes suggest some books to be used in the revised manuscript, ignoring the fact that the author does not have these books at his fingertips.

4. Suggestions and Recommendations

1. The university should provide training courses on academic publishing. They can also organize workshops.
2. It is very important to read books about academic publishing. Novice researchers can learn a lot about academic publishing by reading many articles that have been published in higher-ranking journals.
3. There are some websites for training authors like AuthorAid (www.authoraid.info) This website helps developing country researchers in their developing their work.
4. Academics are likely to gain many benefits if they join research networks and associations that gather like-minded scholars. There are many educational and professional networks in which academics might meet experts in the same filed. Examples include Academia, LinkedIn, Research Gate, etc. Some novice scholars might also join Facebook groups about publication.
5. Journals should publish only for those who really deserve to be published. The editors must select the reviewers on the basis of their competence and expertise and not on the basis of other criteria.
6. Reviewers should be objective in the sense that they have to act as improvers and advisers. Rather than playing the roles of gatekeepers, they must be facilitators. If the reviewers do not do their job properly, they should be replaced by others.
7. It is a good idea to co-author papers with international colleagues.
8. Authors shouldn't always expect success at their first try. If the paper is rejected, the author should never despair, and he should rather try to improve himself.
9. To increase the readership of the journals, researchers are encouraged to write their papers in English, because it is the international language of science and scholarly publishing. Papers that are written in Arabic will be read only by speakers of that language.

Authors should avoid journals that charge a fee. These should be the option of last resort.

5. Conclusion

Academic publishing is the measure of assessing others. By getting one's work published in a peer reviewed journal, one becomes a member of the academic community. Scholarly publishing helps to achieve promotion for both the teacher and the university. Unfortunately, the African academia is marked by the dearth of publishing in high-ranked journals. The latter circulate only in developed countries. In fact, there is a need to criticize the current academic environment for all its faults. Some scholars are mired in dismal conditions that make it difficult for them to make research and to publish in high ranked journals of their dream. The impediments that hamper academic publishing consist mainly of the obstacles that are created by the work environment and also by the unethical practices. These obstacles might be removed by putting the right person in the right place and by improving the work conditions and the means of academic research. If there is a strong will, it is possible to increase the quality of academic papers and journals to achieve the same status as their counterparts in the developed countries. Despite the harsh academic environment, researchers have to persevere and assert their existence in the academic community.

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