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Human Inquiry in Scholarly Communication: Reconnecting With the Foundations of Research

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Scholarly Communication

Emily Ford

Human inquiry in scholarly communication

Reconnecting with the foundations of research

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

Over the past several decades there have been innumerable improvements and innovations in scholarly communication. Technological disruption of publishing environments has afforded us the opportunity to further open access publishing. However, proprietary publishing has influenced many of the processes in the scholarly publishing ecosystem, including, but not limited to, increasing subscription costs, furthering a for-profit agenda that changed peer review from community-led to opaque and owned by publishers, as well as introducing hugely inflated article processing charges.¹

But through all of this I fear that we have strayed from the point—our innate human curiosity and our collective endeavors to learn about and make sense of this world that we live on and in. Scientific research as we know it began long ago, and with it, scholarly communication practices. If one understands scholarly communication as the practice and study of scientific documentation, dissemination, and all its associated institutional and cultural practices, it is inherently related to being human. Research is an inherently human endeavor and began in earnest because of the vast creativity and curiosity of which the human brain is capable. Moreover, human knowledge is expressed via written and oral communication.² As such, scholarly communication is inherently a human practice. Scholarly communication work is about the people. It is about our need to inquire and to share what we have learned. This is basic human connection.

I contend that it is easy, in a globalized, profit-driven knowledge economy, for us humans to forget about ourselves and our inherent needs and values. What would be the point of unique identifiers such as ORCID or the Research Organization Registry (ROR) if we did not want to connect our inquiry and discovery with others? These tools allow us to connect with people and institutions that are engaged in the human work of discovery. But too often we get into the weeds of Plan S, or economic breakdown, or budget cuts, or austerity, or neoliberal higher education, or funding policies, or the greed that capitalism has introduced to proprietary publishing. There is also the move to enhance scholarly communication tasks with artificial intelligence (AI).³ Writing of literature reviews, reviewer selection, the writing of referee reports, and other tasks have been discussed as benefitting from AI. But these all take away human connection and human inquiry, which are the core value and mission of our work.

I am a midcareer librarian who stumbled into scholarly communication work because of my interest in copyright, open access, and open peer review. While I am not employed as a scholarly communication librarian, my research and service work follow the themes. But it has struck me that a lot of scholarly communication work can get stuck in the weeds, and we forget what we are doing this for. I am of the view that librarianship is a human-focused profession and have been inspired by Andre Cossette's *Humanism is Libraries*.⁴ In fact, I repeat R. David Lanke's statement from *The Atlas of New Librarianship* to myself almost daily: ". . . a room full of books is simply an empty closet but an empty room with a librarian in it is a library."⁵ More recently, I've been moved by Adrienne Maree Brown's *Emergent Strategy*, which offers a positive and imaginative outlook, leading me to further believe that if we reconnect with the human aspects of scholarly communication, that we will strengthen our scholarly communication systems and practices.⁶

If we were to lead scholarly communication work with our human values—elevating inquiry, creativity, and the sharing of knowledge—what systems would we create? What practices would we develop? And how would those practices remain true to those values? I contend that with the proprietarization of scholarly communication by

commercial institutions and entities, we are moving away from scholarly communication as a human endeavor. It is about connection and communication, not commoditization. How much money do we spend on subscriptions, and are researchers paying proprietary publishing to make their works available? Who benefits? Largely the proprietary publishers.

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

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

Adopt anti-racist scholarly communication practices

Part of human inquiry and connection is about honoring who we are and our different experiences in the world. As such, we can frame our scholarly communication efforts with an antiracist lens and work against systemic oppression in scholarly communication—these efforts are about honoring people. As individuals we can sign on to and use the “Anti-racist scholarly reviewing practices: A heuristic for editors, reviewers, and authors.”⁷ Institutions, organizations, and publications should engage with the Coalition for Diversity and Inclusion in Scholarly Communications's *Anti-racism Toolkit for Organizations*.⁸ These two publications are but two examples of guidance and work we can embrace to engage in antioppression work in scholarly communication.

Reframe our efforts and view them through a human lens

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

When we ask these questions as individuals we are advocating to reconnect to the human nature of research. These questions do not have straightforward answers, and as we work in teams and organizations, the conversations we have around these values will be messy, perhaps emotional, and difficult. But all of those things are part of what it is to be human in the world. This is human work.

Practice refusal

Refuse the current paradigm. Camille Noûs's 2021 article outlines the act of refusal in scholarly communication, stating, “Refusal in academia, in scholarly communication, means ceasing to negotiate, ceasing to recognize the extractive publishers and give them the benefit of our engagement.”⁹ Refusal is not divestment, and it is not resistance, neither of which go far enough. Nor is refusal coming to compromise our values. Noûs argues that refusal in scholarly communication is to refuse the article processing charge, to refuse whiteness, to refuse vendors with unethical data practices, and more. “We need to refuse crisis narratives that serve capitalism, particularly when they imply neoliberal solutions. We need to start collectively refusing our labour and time as solidarity.”¹⁰ In this view we build our solidarity in communities outside of the academic community, as well as within, to work towards liberation from capitalism and all that it entails.

Refusal is a radical call, and indeed organizations and institutions are loathe to fully embrace it. The Budapest Open Access Initiative 20th Anniversary Recommendations (BOAI20) make gains, but do not utter complete refusal.¹¹ Of their four overarching recommendations, their reminder to “remember the goals to which OA is the means” is a nod at keeping scholarly communication in line with its values. But like all radical anticapitalist ideals, large organizations and institutions will not fully embrace them. This tension can leave scholarly communication workers in a proverbial bind—When can we refuse? When must we simply resist? And how do we marry our personal values with what our institutions and organizations can stomach?

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

Notes

1. Aileen Fyfe, Kelly Coate, Stephen Curry, Stuart Lawson, Noah Moxham, and Camilla Mørk Røstvik, "Untangling Academic Publishing: A History of the Relationship between Commercial Interests, Academic Prestige, and the Circulation of Research," University of St. Andrews, May 2017, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.546100> (<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.546100>); Times Higher Education (THE), "Nature's OA Fee Seems Outrageously High—but Many Will Pay It," December 1, 2020, <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/natures-oa-fee-seems-outrageously-high-many-will-pay-it> (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/natures-oa-fee-seems-outrageously-high-many-will-pay-it>).
2. I should note that humans also have embodied knowledge and different knowledges, and these are equally important to our humanity and lived experiences. For instance, the knowledge our DNA carries about our ancestors and their experiences are a form of knowledge. In this column, however, I concentrate on the knowledge gained via our human curiosity and research and its relevance to sharing that knowledge with others.
3. Rachel Burley, "How AI Is Accelerating Research Publishing," Research Information, November 1, 2021, <https://www.researchinformation.info/analysis-opinion/how-ai-accelerating-research-publishing> (<https://www.researchinformation.info/analysis-opinion/how-ai-accelerating-research-publishing>); CACM, Computational Support for Academic Peer Review, 2017, <https://vimeo.com/201905108>; Alessandro Checco, Lorenzo Bracciale, Pierpaolo Loreti, Stephen Pinfield, and Giuseppe Bianchi, "AI-Assisted Peer Review," *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 8, no. 1 (December 2021): 25, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-020-00703-8> (<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-020-00703-8>).
4. André Cossette, *Humanism and Libraries: An Essay on the Philosophy of Librarianship* (Duluth, Minnesota: Library Juice Press) 2009; Emily Ford, "What Do We Do and Why Do We Do It?—In the Library with the Lead Pipe," 2012, <https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2012/what-do-we-do-and-why-do-we-do-it> (<https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2012/what-do-we-do-and-why-do-we-do-it>).
5. R. David Lankes, *The Atlas of New Librarianship* (MIT Press, 2011), 16.
6. Adrienne M. Brown, *Emergent Strategy* (Chico, California: AK Press, 2017).
7. "Anti-Racist Scholarly Reviewing Practices: A Heuristic for Editors, Reviewers, and Authors," 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/reviewheuristic> (<https://tinyurl.com/reviewheuristic>).
8. Coalition for Diversity and Inclusion in Scholarly Communications, "Antiracism Toolkit for Organizations," 2021, <https://doi.org/10.21428/77410d6b.9a476dc8> (<https://doi.org/10.21428/77410d6b.9a476dc8>).
9. Camille Noûs, "Message from the Grassroots: Scholarly Communication, Crisis, and Contradictions," *Canadian Journal of Academic Librarianship* 7 (December 15, 2021), 1–27, <https://doi.org/10.33137/cjalrcbu.v7.36448> (<https://doi.org/10.33137/cjalrcbu.v7.36448>), p. 17-18.
10. Noûs, "Message from the Grassroots," 18.
11. BOAI20 Steering Group, "Budapest Open Access Initiatives: 20th Anniversary Recommendations," 2022, <https://www.budapestopenaccessinitiative.org/boai20/> (<https://www.budapestopenaccessinitiative.org/boai20/>).