# Publishing in Academic Journals: The Case of *Asiatic*

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## Introduction: An Anecdote

Once an acquaintance of mine shared with me their article published in a journal. I was about to write "Congratulations!" in reply, but resisted the urge to perform the customary social nicety. I know many people congratulate authors in a ritualistic and theatrical fashion; but I wanted to take a look at the work before commending the author. The quality of the work did not fulfil my expectations and, after going through the opening lines, I could not bring myself to read the remainder of the article. I have not replied to the author until now.

A few days later, a friend gave me the web link to the same article with a request to read the material. I somehow understood that they wanted me to comment on the quality of the work, in which I showed no interest. Frustrated, they then drew my attention to the article's second author who is a senior academic. How could they put their name as an author in such a half-baked and badly-written work, my friend wondered. I did not comment, as I needed not their input to understand the dubious publishing practices of a section of academics.

This anecdote raises questions which must concern those involved in writing and publishing. If a material has no scholarly merit to attract readers' attention and has no value beyond its publication, writing and publishing it is not a worthy intellectual exercise. Publishing for short-term gains – promotion, increased wages, or ostentation and vainglory – is an affront to genuine scholars and to their intellectual integrity and commitment. The writing and publishing exercise must have a higher purpose than seeing one's name featured along with their work.

Academics who produce abstruse, sloppy, and poor quality work are not necessarily incompetent, poorly-schooled, or lacking in writing skills. Perhaps, their writing is marked by hastiness or lack of care and precision. The absence of commitment or wrong attitude to academic work also plays a role in lowering the quality of their work, which risks disappointing readers. What is worse is that many academics ignore ethical principles and insert their names as co-authors in

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the manuscripts of their colleagues or students only to inflate their publication records, on which the following discussion will focus.

**"Free Riders"**

As *Asiatic*'s editor, I regularly receive multi-authored contributions for publication in the journal. Generally, the list of authors in such papers includes both junior academics or PhD candidates and their senior colleagues or supervisors. When I read such submissions for evaluation purposes, in many cases, I do not see any imprint of scholarship, originality, or sophistication commensurate with the academic standing of the senior colleagues or the supervisors listed as co-authors. Often regarded as "free riders," such academics commit authorship abuse or authorial corruption by adding their names as co-authors of papers of their juniors or students, and that without making substantial intellectual contributions to them.

If someone gives the idea of a paper or has a discussion with the author, offers other advisory services, or "provide[s] financial assistance and technical support, … review[s] and critique[s] … a manuscript," their names may deserve a mention in the acknowledgement section, but not in the list of authors (King 21). There are differences of opinion about the perennial question of what makes one an author and what their ethical obligations are. However, I think no one will deem it ethically acceptable to confer authorship on someone who expects their name to appear on someone else's paper as an author, even when they have made very minimum contribution to the research or have just given the idea of the paper or feedback on the manuscript. Academic integrity demands that people do not take credit for co-authoring a manuscript if they have made limited or questionable contribution or have not satisfied the criteria for authorship – the proverbial one being that only those who make substantive intellectual contributions to a work qualify as its authors.

Even if there is an 'understanding' and the 'real' author puts the names of the free riders unreservedly, my sincere opinion is that, such a practice of multiple authorship is unethical. An author is one who makes adequate academic contribution which will enable them "to take responsibility for the manuscript" (King 21). Claiming authorship without making sufficient contribution to a work reeks of academic sleaze and moral lapses. Like plagiarism, the menace of authorship abuse is a form of academic dishonesty which "can ruin an author's reputation" (King 19). For those who aspire to publish in *Asiatic*, I want to reiterate this unequivocal stance that the journal does not consider publishing papers that smack of questionable authorship. Accordingly, the journal has recently adopted a policy that it "may not consider publishing a manuscript with more than three authors" ("Author Guidelines"). My responsibility of running *Asiatic* includes selecting for each issue the most meritorious papers from submissions made to the journal. In doing so, I am driven by a commitment to ensure ethics in manuscript authorship as well as to maintain the quality of articles selected for publication. Having discussed the former in the preceding section, in what follows, I will touch on the latter.

**Publication and Reputation**

It is understood that not all academics publish journal articles and other scholarly works purely for the love of knowledge. Nor do they always generate, disseminate, or share knowledge for public good. There are people who publish for personal and professional advancement, and for other non-altruistic reasons, including recognition, remuneration, ingratiation, and self-promotion. I do not want to discuss the intention and motivation of the author here, but the fact remains that once written works and publications are in the public domain, writers have no control whatsoever over their material and become subject to public scrutiny and criticism.

A well-researched, carefully-crafted, and well-argued publication brings to the reader a sophisticated and insightful body of knowledge. Such publications also bring laurels for the author-scholars and their institutions. Conversely, spurious and garbled publications – often full of incomprehensible sentences – inspire contempt and disdain for the authors and for their affiliations, as a result of which both may fall into disrepute. In my opinion, publishing such materials that carry the names of the author and their employer is a form of disservice that lowers the standing of both.

Readers (contemporary and future) in a far-off land may not necessarily know the author, but may have heard the name of the university for which the latter works. In such a case, the quality of the publication will influence the reputation and image of the author's university. Therefore, I believe it is not too much to demand of academics that they do not publish misbegotten or unworthy journal articles or other research materials which may earn a bad name for themselves and their employers (universities).

I am aware of the existence of "predatory" journals that offer academics and researchers the opportunity to publish their work without proper vetting in exchange for payment. I do not believe that true scholars will choose to document their research in such unscrupulous publications. While academic writers should consider the reputation of their own and their universities, they should also remember that the dignity and respect that is intrinsic to the act of publishing is mostly attributed to the honourable tradition that writers have established over centuries and millennia. However, publishing practices have now undergone enormous changes, which present novel challenges for writers.

**Publishing Then and Now**

In the past, especially before the explosion of Internet use in the late 1990s, publication of a scholarly work had a stronger significance, especially in terms of reception by readers. There was a scarcity of published knowledge and information. Hence, when a book or other written work appeared in the public domain, avid and thirsty readers used to look it up and consume it at the very first opportunity. Moreover, most writers were gifted amateurs endowed with creative talents, intelligence, and authorial agency. They used to explore their role and position in society and instinctively pursue writing as a craft.

That has now changed significantly. Publishing has become an imperative in the academic world, and people engage in it for both instinctive and compulsive reasons. As Devlin and Radloff state: "The current emphasis on research productivity as a key measure of institutional standing has put growing pressure on academic staff to publish in peer-reviewed journals" (230). The need, if not the urge, to publish in highly-esteemed (English-language) journals is largely motivated by the drive to survive in an academic environment that is characterised by intense competition in enhancing research and publication credentials. It is almost impossible to ignore the publish-or-perish truism that has increasingly induced stress among both young and established scholars, as publishing in recognised indexed journals helps "in gaining a position or being promoted" (van Dalen 1675). Even though the "conviction that academics who do not publish in refereed journals are doomed to 'perish'" is debatable or even considered "specious" (Hussey 251), it cannot be denied that those who write and publish responsibly are engaged in teaching, learning, and producing knowledge in a more meaningful way. Despite different perceptions of the "publish or perish" mantra, for good reasons and for not-so-good reasons, publishing activity is currently at an all-time high and "is often a central focus of institutional evaluation criteria for academics" (Curry and Lillis 23). That is to say, research and publication is often the most important consideration to evaluate the performance of university academics and to assess their epistemic abilities and achievements. As an indicator of scholarly productivity, it features prominently in the yearly evaluation of academic staff.

Recently, the hunger to publish has been further fuelled by many universities that have made publication a graduation requirement for research students. In most cases, they are required to publish parts of their theses in journals – often specified by degree-awarding universities – before the viva-voce examination or graduation. Therefore, the number of scholars desiring to publish has increased drastically. Moreover, amateurs, professionals and non-professionals of other persuasions also write and publish for a myriad of reasons. Additionally, technological advances and the development of informal methods of publication have undoubtedly made the publishing landscape more complex. With the prevalence of the Internet and social media, "traditional methods of publication have been supplanted by discussion forums and bulletin boards" (Poller, Ljung, and Gonda 340) as well as by blogs and other digital channels, including platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp. Hence, the dream of being a published author is now achievable for many – publishing is not as remote, out of reach, and weighty as it was in earlier times.

Mainly because of relative ease and affordability of publishing and distributing content (print and online), the volume of published material has increased exponentially. Improved searchability and visibility of, and easy access to, published materials (with or without fees) are now more efficient due to digital technologies. In such a context of infosphere and cyberculture, readers are inundated by reading material. This is a good sign for knowledge production and gives the reader a better bargain. However, it puts the writer in an unenviable position because, "[j]ust as products in a market decrease in value when supply exceeds demands" (Eckhouse 132), their writings have to vie for readers. Writers have to compete "to gain advantage over other forces that contend for their audience's attention" (Eckhouse 1).

At one level, writers compete with forces that conspire to divert readers' attention from knowledge consumption to other tasks or leisure activities. At an advanced level, they compete with their own kind. A piece of writing now has to compete with other written compositions available out there, and it will arouse the interest of the reader only if it has an edge over other documents, in terms of both content and language. If writers do not "offer the audience something different that is of value" (Eckhouse 1), the audience will exercise their power to choose and go for other materials which are better written and provide better information. If readers have access to hundreds of materials on a specific topic, they will not have time to consult all of them and will have to make choices; and the selection of reading materials will be made entirely on the basis of their superior scientific and academic merit. Nepotism or prejudice plays almost no role in scholarly material selection, as quality reigns supreme here. This demands that writers are competitive and sufficiently familiar with the art of publishing so that they can sail smoothly in this journey of life as knowledge producers.

## The Art of Publishing

Conducting research, overcoming writers' block, and writing a paper are daunting tasks, but they on their own may not guarantee its publication in prestigious journals. There are other important steps to take on the way before finally finding the manuscript a home in a journal. These include adhering to "submission and style guidelines" as well as following peer reviewers' recommendations and editors' advice (Derntl 106). Willingness to make multiple revisions according to manuscript evaluators' and/or editors' comments is equally important.

Writing and publishing in reputed journals, even if achievable, is a challenging task for most researchers. This is perhaps one reason why "the majority of academics do not engage successfully and consistently in publishing" (Hussey 251). On a separate note, despite the respect and attention they enjoy, those with PhD degrees do not necessarily have an advantage over their non-

PhD counterparts in the art of writing and publishing (Devlin and Radloff 244). Therefore, both groups need to put sincere efforts to improve the standard of their writing and to achieve the desired goal of putting their writing into circulation (print and/or online) and taking pride in their finished pieces.

## The Case of *Asiatic*

*Asiatic* has made a name for itself and attracts hundreds of submissions every year – thanks to its founding Editor-in-Chief Mohammad A. Quayum (1954-) who ran it almost singlehandedly from its inception in 2007 to 2020 when I took over the responsibility of editing it. Based on my experience, the rejection rate of the journal is very high. This is now common with all good journals because "the increased focus on publication in highly ranked journals has led to many more papers being submitted" to them (Devlin and Radloff 231), which make successful publication more difficult.

Many manuscripts are rejected at the initial screening stage for a variety of reasons, such as plagiarism, disproportionate amount of quotation, inadequate or excessive length, irrelevance to the remit of the journal, non-adherence to author guidelines or article template, and overall poor quality. When it becomes obvious that the contributor did not consult or follow author guidelines before making a submission, rejection is most likely an outcome. Submitting extracts (copy paste materials) from theses without converting them into article manuscripts can lead to the same disappointment. Therefore, my sincere advice to future authors seeking to submit their research to *Asiatic* for publication is to carefully read the scope of the journal, author guidelines, and the article template available on the journal website before making a submission. I also advise them to read articles – especially those relevant to their research – published in previous issues of the journal in order to have a sense of the structure and quality of contributions that it invites and publishes. Some of the above suggestions are important for book review and creative writing contributors as well.

It is perhaps worth mentioning here that, with outright rejection messages from editors, authors should not expect detailed comments or feedback for improving their manuscripts. This is because editors are not authors' academic guides or supervisors. An editor will employ time and energy in having a manuscript evaluated if they see some merit in it. If reviewers recommend the publication of a manuscript and if the editor agrees with it, only then the latter will provide feedback and embark on editing the manuscript. At the editor's level, the review is likely to be more thorough and engaging. All these processes help the author develop their manuscript further and present their arguments more precisely and coherently.

On a separate note, being an open access journal, *Asiatic* does not receive any sales proceeds. Hence, to meet some of its expenses, in certain cases we request contributors to pay a negotiable amount as publication fees. But our focus is on the quality of manuscripts, not on fees, as the host of the journal (International Islamic University Malaysia) is committed to disseminating knowledge and information for altruistic, humanitarian reasons. We discuss fees only when we see a paper is acceptable for publication. Therefore, it will be wrong to presume that an author can publish their error-filled and badly-written manuscript in *Asiatic* with money.

Sometimes I receive requests from authors to consider their manuscripts for publication in June or December issues. Let me clarify here that, except in the case of special issues, *Asiatic* accepts manuscript submissions all year round, and final acceptance and scheduling for publication are based on the peer-review process and/or editorial decision-making.

**Conclusion: *Asiatic* as a Q1 Journal**

The Scimago Journal & Country Rank (JCR) index of *Asiatic* has now improved from Q2 to Q1 (the highest quartile) in the field of "Literature and Literary Theory." While many have embraced this news as a recognition of success and a reason for celebration, it came to me as a cause for reflection and renewed commitment and as a burden of responsibility. Maintaining this ranking and ensuring the uplift of the journal's academic standards and guaranteeing its continuous growth demand perseverance, resilience and tenacity on my part and that of the editorial team. This also has implications for future contributors to *Asiatic*. In the days to come, the journal will be more rigorous in reviewing and selecting papers for publication. Therefore, manuscripts may not make it to the journal if their contributors are not willing to work hard on their planning, preparation, and submission.

The level of rigour that we have applied to the final selection of the eight main articles in this special issue is a testament to what I have said above. These eight papers have been sieved from over one hundred submissions. I am grateful to the special issue editors – Rabiah Tul Adawiyah Mohamed Salleh (International Islamic University Malaysia) and Bruno Di Biase (Western Sydney University) – for preparing earlier drafts of the articles for publication in this issue and for all other support they have rendered to *Asiatic*, including their efforts to help review manuscripts. My very special thanks go also to Nur Atikah Yusri for all her technical support, especially with formatting the pieces for publication. We hope readers will find them useful and intellectually stimulating and rewarding.

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