

Reflections on My Editorial Praxis

Md. Mahmudul Hasan¹
International Islamic University Malaysia

Abstract

University academics have teaching and research responsibilities and are expected to contribute to the corpus of knowledge. The respect and recognition they receive from the public are contingent upon their intellectual contributions. However, there are academics who do not put much effort into research and writing, or they produce written works of subpar standards. They may have impressive educational qualifications or research degrees but are often encumbered by insufficient diligence (if not insufficient talent) in academic activities. Such scholars lack competitive edge and do not fare well in publishing in top-tier journals. In this essay, I reflect on my editorial experience and discuss the discrepancy between the standing of a section of university academics and the quality of writing they produce.

Keywords

Publishing in journals, editorial experience, editors as gatekeepers, university academics, editorial altruism

Introduction

During COVID-19 related movement restrictions, people in Kuala Lumpur – as in many other cities around the world – were allowed to go out only for bare necessities. I left home mainly for groceries and other essentials. The city looked like a war zone, as roadblocks – manned by grim-faced, gun-toting security personnel – dotted its main roads. While most vehicles were stopped and their drivers questioned, I was spared the trouble of answering the routine, predictable questions of the security forces. They looked at the university sticker on the windscreen of my car and waved me on; I continued driving.

My usual interactions are chiefly with academics and students; I do not have many opportunities to mingle with the public. However, my experience with the security forces in the streets during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced my belief that there is a huge amount of respect among the general population for teachers, especially those affiliated with universities.

¹ **Md. Mahmudul Hasan** is with IIUM's Department of English Language and Literature and the Editor-in-Chief of *Asiatic*. He completed a PhD in comparative/postcolonial literature at Portsmouth and was a postdoctoral researcher at Heidelberg. He has published extensively with the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, Brill, Georgia Southern University, Orient BlackSwan, Routledge, SAGE, Wiley-Blackwell, and other presses.

Compared to college and school teachers, university academics have less classroom contact time with students. Lighter teaching loads of university lecturers mean that they have more time for conducting research and for knowledge production, which partly explains their distinctiveness and the high regard they enjoy in society. If a university academic is concerned only with teaching and does not conduct research and produce knowledge, that will lead to an appalling waste of talent and intellectual capital, and the underutilization of academic knowledge and resources. Equally, if an academic with an impressive array of achievements produces poor quality manuscripts and seeks to get them published, that will amount to a dereliction of duty on their part. All this has implications for journal editors, on which I shall focus in what follows.

Editors' challenges

Poor quality research work submitted for publication poses a challenge to the task of most editors in maintaining/improving the standing of their journals. This explains why most prestigious journals have very high rejection rates, as editors and reviewers prevent poor-quality manuscripts from being published and thus seek to sustain the reputation of their periodicals.

More than a decade ago, I had a two-year editing stint with the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh (Humanities)*. I have now been editing *Asiatic: IJUM Journal of English Language and Literature* since 2020, and the current issue is going to be the fourth (and perhaps the last) issue of the journal I will have edited. Based on my experience with both the journals, I can say that there is some discrepancy between the professional (superior) credentials of some academics and the quality of their written work. Sadly, manuscripts produced by such academics do not necessarily bear imprints of their professional identity and dignity.

There have been many incidents where, in my editorial role, I felt disillusioned after reading manuscripts submitted by academics of considerable influence and stature. Many of them met 'desk' or 'in house' rejections while others were sent out for further evaluation but suffered a similar fate upon review. It is true that, given the competitive nature of publishing, many good manuscripts are rejected for reasons of high submission traffic, and many hardworking academics struggle to meet the challenges of publishing in top-tier journals. However, it is also true that a section of academics exhibit little interest or lack of adequate competence in doing the enormous amount of work required to produce writings that are publishable in more established, recognised journals. The absence of diligence and lack of commitment to academic work are common among this group of researchers.

While driving my car and meeting the security personnel in the streets of Kuala Lumpur during the COVID-19 pandemic, such thoughts were crowding through my mind. The general public have the impression that university academics spend their time and energy inspiring and building future leaders and

generating beneficial knowledge; and hence the respect and enhanced status they are accorded in society. However, if they are not sincere and hardworking in their roles as university teachers, there can be a legitimate question as to whether they deserve all the accolades and respect given to them almost automatically. Based on this and other experiences, I think it is important to comment on the research and publication activities of university academics and the challenges of journal editors.

Are there readers to read?

Even if shallow academics find ways to publish their half-baked writings in journals of questionable quality and reputability, they may not feel confident to share their published works with friends and colleagues. What is more, readers may not consider it worthwhile to spend time reading such materials. Authors of such works may earn dividends in the form of success in the promotion ladder or in gaining somewhat undeserved advantage and recognition. However, the fact of the matter is that even if their writings help them climb the career ladder successfully in a dog-eat-dog manner, they may not attract readers and most of their writings may remain insipid and obscure.

Publishing is not (and should not be) the end result of research. The worth of a written work primarily rests on the depth of understanding and insight of its author; and its real contribution to the body of knowledge begins after it is made available in the public domain. If a published article or book does not attract or benefit readers, then it is a botched job from beginning to end. In today's world, readers have many choices in front of them. The phenomenal growth in the number of writers has proved favourable to readers who are privileged with a plenitude of reading materials. Most readers are discerning human beings capable of selecting the right books and articles, as they have the luxury of choosing the best products from available sources. So it is unlikely that they will pick a badly written and poorly argued work to read.

There is another worrying trend that indicates that readers of academic books and articles are decreasing. Many people who would otherwise read scholarly works now have their eyes glued to the screen, devouring the Internet or waiting for more online fodder. Twitter feeds or Facebook/WhatsApp postings consume much of their reading time, and this creates a disconnect between them and scholarly work.

In the powerful essay "The Small Personal Voice" (1957), the Nobel laureate in literature Doris Lessing in her characteristically prescient manner warns us, stating:

We are living at a time which is so dangerous, violent, explosive, and precarious that it is in question whether soon there will be people left alive to write books and to read them. It is a question of life and death for all of us; and we are haunted, all of us, by the threat that even if some

madman does not destroy us all, our children may be born deformed or mad. (11)

As regards the number of writers, one can both agree and disagree with Lessing's observation. In one sense, contrary to what Lessing tells us, the number of writers is on the rise, thanks to the publish-or-perish culture that has put academics under pressure to conduct research and increase their publication counts. In many cases, careers "rise or fall and reputations flourish or flounder on the strength" of one's publications (Richards and Wasserman 824). On the other hand, if looked at from another perspective, Lessing's forewarning of what was to come has proved prophetic. Writers and their written products have increased only in volume but arguably decreased in quality, reliability, and substance. In the academic world, there are people who write and publish out of career needs, and not out of any intrinsic interest in knowledge and scholarship or any altruistic reason. They write for tenure or promotion and do not have the interest of readers in mind when they write their pieces. As a result, their research loses meaning upon publication. If such writers are excluded from the list, the number of those who remain may not match the high production rate of published books and articles.

I am in full agreement with Lessing's statement about the dwindling number of readers. There are *mad(wo)men* here and there, and it is true that they have not eliminated the human race yet; children are not being born physically incomplete or *deformed* in great numbers. However, mental deformity or psychological aberration seems to have been increasingly gripping many adults and children alike. Among its manifestations is addiction to smartphones and their applications and to social media platforms with their instant availability through various devices. Therefore, the number of readers of academic work is in steep decrease. For example, if an educated person spends a couple of hours a day on social media or any web-based platforms, they may not have enough time or appetite to read or write scholarly texts even if they want to. I believe it is important that sensitive writers and astute editors keep these points in mind.

Manuscript rejections and editorial altruism

When a manuscript of mine is rejected by an editor, I do not blame them for their decision, as they gain nothing by declining to run my publishable work. Most editors' main intention is to safeguard and enhance their journal's reputation and to shepherd and support worthy research articles (Starfield and Paltridge 254). Moreover, there are good reasons for me to become grateful to judicious editors. First, in most cases, their rejection notes come with recommendations for me to improve the quality of my work, and they make some laudable effort to reach a decision on my manuscript. Second, by rejecting my manuscript, they have protected me from possible public embarrassment, as I also do not want a work of questionable quality to be published under my name. A confident writer will not be upset by a negative editorial decision or by editors' feedback on their work.

Blaming the editors and then ceasing to work on the manuscript is a reflection of poor attitudes to academic work.

Journal editors are gatekeepers of knowledge (research production) for a reason, and one should put their trust in their discretion and judgment and regard their “gatekeeping role” as “a high level of quality control” (McBee and Matthews 8) without a sense of malice. I have enormous respect for all the editors, production editors, and the anonymous reviewers who evaluate my work. The support I receive from them in improving my manuscripts is comparable to that I had from my PhD supervisors. However, unfortunately, editors can also be vulnerable to undue accusations, as their sincere advice and feedback can be misconstrued or misinterpreted by authors.

During my editorial stints, I had my own research and writing projects. Since producing the issues of a journal is time sensitive, in most cases, I have had to put aside my own writing projects and attend to the manuscripts submitted to the journal and edit the ones accepted for publication. Therefore, in my opinion, it requires a generous dose of altruism on the part of responsible editors to run their journals.

Reviewers’ role

Editors are assisted by reviewers in evaluating manuscripts and in determining which ones will be brought to the next steps of editing and publishing. They remain exceedingly grateful to meticulous reviewers who offer detailed, much needed recommendations for the authors and editors. However, editors suffer from drawbacks when a manuscript goes to a wrong reviewer and receives imprecise evaluation. As Sue Starfield and Brian Paltridge put it:

Part of the reviewer’s responsibility is to actually review the paper, i.e. to spend time reading and thinking about it and writing considered feedback. Reviews which contain just a couple of sentences or which comment solely on grammatical errors and typos are not really helpful, as [editors] may then have to seek another reviewer for the submission, thus, delaying a decision on the paper. (259)

There are incompetent and negligent reviewers whose incompetence and negligence are manifested in their inadequate review reports. It can also be a cause of embarrassment for the editor when a reviewer recommends the publication of a mediocre manuscript without careful thought and consideration. Conversely, when a reviewer suggests the rejection of a good manuscript without proper deliberation, that causes a loss for the journal and injustice on the author.

Conclusion: My involvement with *Asiatic*

While editing *Asiatic*, I have learnt many things on the job and have had the privilege of working with many sincere and competent authors and scholars from around the world. At the same time, I have built academic networks which may

survive my tenure as the Editor-in-Chief of the journal. In this and many other senses, my editorial involvement with the journal has been highly rewarding.

From its inception in 2007, *Asiatic* had one (founding) editor – Mohammad A. Quayum (1954-) – until I took over the responsibility of editing it in 2020. Under his editorship, the journal gained international recognition. In some ways, my job and the job of future editors are to maintain its standing and if possible enhance its reputation and augment its academic standards. My editorial contribution to *Asiatic* is an open book and stands by itself. Readers may not need to depend on the indexing algorithm to assess the quality of the issues I have produced. They can visit the journal website and see them for real.

One of the responsibilities of an editor is to hand a journal “over to the next editors in as good if not better shape than when [they] began” (Starfield and Paltridge 254). I hope I have lived up to this expectation. That said, I will be there to help my successors in whatever way possible, as it is the collective responsibility of the academics of IIUM’s Department of English Language and Literature to ensure the continued success and progress of the journal and to take it forward.

References

- Lessing, Doris. “The Small Personal Voice.” In Doris Lessing, *A Small Personal Voice: Essays, Reviews, Interviews*. Ed. Paul Schlueter. London: Flamingo, 1994/1957. 7-25.
- McBee, Matthew T., and Michael S. Matthews. “Change starts with journal editors: In response to Makel (2014).” *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, Vol. 8, No.1 (2014): 8–10.
- Richards, Ian, and Herman Wasserman. “The heart of the matter: Journal editors and journals.” *Journalism*, Vol. 14, No. 6 (2013): 823–836.
- Starfield, Sue, and Brian Paltridge. “Journal editors: Gatekeepers or custodians?.” *Novice Writers and Scholarly Publication*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2019. 253-270.