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BORDERS

# PUBLISHING IN ACADEMIA: IMPROVING ACCESS TO ACADEMIC PUBLISHING

CONFERENCE REPORT

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This report has been peer reviewed by Dr. Caroline Varin and Theresa Cariola

# INTRODUCTION

On the 31 May 2021, Prowibo held a webinar on Publishing in Academia as part of the Access in Higher Education Initiative. The webinar included two panels; “How to Publish and Where” followed by “Tips and Tools for Academic Writing”.

Publishing with a reputable academic journal or book publisher carries a lot of weight in academia. It can be a gateway to launching your career, speaks towards an educator or scholar’s credibility and helps them remain fresh within their respective fields. While being published may be the ultimate goal, researchers also want their work to have an impact and reach the target audiences. To this end, publishers are the gateway to getting the work out to all the right places.

This webinar aimed to improve opportunities and success rates for publishing in academia, particularly for under-represented communities of academics. The panelists included representatives of internationally renowned academic publishers as well as educators with experience from various professional fields. Using the information the panelists provided, Professors Without Borders released a [toolkit](#) for publishing in academia – which can be referred to when looking to get work accepted for publication.



## PANEL 1. How to Publish and Where

The first panel featured representatives from world-renown book and journal publishers, and was designed as an interactive session. The panelists each had three minutes to share their insights on questions posed by moderators Michael Ogu from Babcock University and Caroline Varin from Professors Without Borders.

**Q: What is sought after in a proposal submitted to a journal or book publisher?**

**Helena Hurd, Editor of African Studies and Global Development books at Routledge** answered the first question by addressing the difference between the academic publishing landscapes of journal and book publishers. She stated that journals will look for a complete and finished article in the initial submission stage, while book publishers require a proposal followed by one or two sample chapters. She stated that when reading a book proposal, she looks for what the original contribution of the book is, how it is relevant and what impact it carries. For this reason, she encouraged authors to think about who would want to read their book and tailor it specifically to that audience.

**Joanna Godfrey, Senior Commissioning editor of History and Current Affairs at Yale University Press**, explained that her publishing company largely looks for books that meet three criteria in book publishing; (1) they address subjects that will attract a wide audience; (2) they are accessible to the general reader i.e., have either a human story or contemporary relevance; and (3) they are written by an author who is an expert in the subject and is starting to build a platform to communicate their research to a wider audience. For this reason, book proposals are commonly assessed on their ability to reach a broad, non-specialist audience.

Regarding journal publishers **Professor Andreas Velthuis, co-editor-in-chief of the African Security Journal**, stated that the hearts of editors can be won by submitting work that has a proper, attention grabbing title and abstract. He explained that in the abstract, it is important to (1) establish what 'gap' the research fills and/or what inspired the author to conduct this research; (2) what the aim of the research is; and (3) what methodology was used. **Sibabalwe Oscar Masinyana, Head of Researcher Services & Networks in Africa at the Taylor & Francis office in South Africa** revealed that he looks for work that has the ability to have a global impact.

For example, work that speaks first to the local context that the researcher is working from, but is written in such a way that it can reach global audiences. He also stressed the importance of adhering to 'international publishing standards', that is, standards expected of any kind of scholarly work, such as proper referencing and avoiding (self)plagiarism.

#### **Q: How to assess the credibility of predatory journals**

Mr Masinyana began by explaining that a legitimate publisher's charges (for example, the article processing or manuscript publishing charges) will be transparent and clearly expressed. He explained that one way predatory publishers can be spotted is by a lack of transparency surrounding the services being offered in exchange for the fees being charged.

He also addressed open access publishing, a movement that has been gaining traction over the years. He explained the concept of open access as an author having their work published in a manner that makes it freely accessible to readers in perpetuity. In open publishing, publishers will often charge article processing fees for the service. In exchange, the article is treated exactly the same way as a paid article would be. This means it is peer reviewed, marketed, promoted as well as archived in order to make it perpetually available. Such measures, Mr Masinyana explained, are not going to be taken by scam or predatory publishers because articles or books are simply posted on websites that are not legitimate publishing platforms. Additionally, the work is not archived and therefore can disappear at any moment. What is more, the work exists outside of the scholarly conversation and can not be cited.

He concluded by explaining that a legitimate publisher does not have to be a big global publisher. It can be small or locally based while still adhering to certain standards of publishing. He pointed to 'Think. Check. Submit.', an organisation that can be helpful in identifying legitimate publishers.

**Q: Many authors have raised concerns about racial/cultural biases in the process of rejecting and accepting manuscripts for publication. How valid are these concerns? Is there importance in cultivating relationships or networking when it comes to being able to get published?**

Ms Hurd acknowledged that biases still exist in academic research, with a disproportionality in certain subject areas. She added that while it has been getting better in recent years with a push to decolonize the curriculum, it is important to recognise that the problem still persists. For this reason, when picking a publisher, she advised choosing those that are more diverse, focusing on embedding diversity and using bias-free language. She also suggested looking for publishers that reflect the author's values, and choosing those that have a reputation for publishing from non-western academics.

On networking, Ms Godfrey added that in terms of academic book publishers, reputable publishers generally have an open submissions policy. This means that researchers looking to get published are free to approach publishers and send in proposals.

**Q: There is a problem of access to research between different countries and universities. Many reputable academic journals require monthly subscription or access fees which are not always accessible to everyone. How can this journal-subscription fee model be balanced with the readership of audiences, particularly in developing countries?**

Mr Masinyana answered that Taylor & Francis has a local publishing programme, which includes local partnerships with African journal societies. These have differential pricings, meaning that they are priced in line with the local market. Furthermore, Taylor & Francis is also part of various access programmes that allow publishers to put their work on different platforms provided by independent developmental organisations. These organisations then make research accessible to a number of institutions within the Global South at a much lower rate. He provided the names of organisations such as [Research4Life](#), [INASP](#) and [EIFL](#).

Furthermore, he explained that Taylor & Francis has an [internal programme](#) for researchers that do not have access to independent organisations or exist outside of the university system. By registering on their webpage, researchers are granted access to all the content on the platform and are able to download up to 100 journal articles per year.

**Q: How do you suggest that reputable journals and publishers democratise knowledge and create opportunities for a wider audience?**

Professor Velthuis emphasised his passion for creating opportunities, particularly for African scholars, to have a voice in publishing.

He stated that there is no merit in exclusion tactics in publishing and that cultural biases should be removed. For one, it is often forgotten that English is not everyone's first language. To this end, he stressed that measures should be added for the provision of tools to authors seeking to publish in languages other than English in order to enable learning from a wider variety of scholars. As part of this goal, his publishing platform, the African Security Review Journal, pays special attention to young scholars and women to inspire positive change and find innovative solutions for many spheres of life.

#### **Q: What are impact factors?**

Professor Velthuis explained that impact factors are indicators of where a publication stands. Although, they are not necessarily an indicator of successful publication because some subjects are simply not as popular as others, or are very niche.

Mr Masinyana added that impact factors represent a very specific term or index that is part of other citation indices. It is all these different indexes that usually calculate how impactful work has been by measuring the average citations that a paper has received over a specific period of time. He explained that most impact factors have a 2–5-year window of calculation, but the problem with this is that sometimes the impact of a research only comes into being years later, especially within fields such as humanities or social sciences. This means that impact factors can indeed be a useful tool, although mainly for fields that have quick turnarounds, for example, in the subjects of science, technology or medicine. He also added a reminder that although a work may be highly cited, it does not necessarily mean it has been positively received. This can also be due to a large volume of negative reception.

Mr Masinyana shed light on the fact that impact factors only measure the impact of the journal as a whole, failing to account for the impact of the individual papers within the journal. He brought attention to an alternative measurement tool, the altmetrics, which examines the impact of the academically published paper in a broader sense, e.g. how often a paper has been shared on social media and/or whether it has appeared in policy documents or blogs. The altmetrics focuses on measuring public engagement with a given paper, looking at a paper's impacts outside of the academic community. Mr Masinyana concluded that this form of measurement also does not account for whether engagement with a paper is positive or negative.

**Q: Are first-time authors less cited? Does this impact the way first time contributors are approached?**

Ms Hurd shared that being a first-time author does not necessarily impact one's level of citation. The amount an author is cited also speaks to the credibility of the academic publishers and their ability to promote work appropriately. Furthermore, it depends on the audience that the publication is targeting, meaning that certain subject areas might capture the zeitgeist more.

Mr Masinyana brought up citation biases, as senior researchers sometimes have been known to take the works of first-time or younger researchers and fail to credit them properly. Professor Velthuis added that the bias also extends to already established researchers, who are more often sought out for referencing. Although all panelists agreed that work that is well contextualised, original and explained has a strong likelihood of being recognised despite such biases.

## **Panel 2. Tips and tools for Academic Writing**

The second panel once again invited the audience into the interactive session. It featured educators Rachel Warnick, Programmes Director at Professors Without Borders and Dr George E. Richards from Edinboro University and co-founder of Prowibo Online, who addressed the question of how to meet the standards and criteria of publishing in (Global North) journals.

Ms Warnick opened the panel by stating that one of the reasons Global North standards are being addressed is to educate and overcome the significant hurdles that many academics outside the Global North face. She presented the audience with an exercise in which the different styles of writing are meant to be spotted within two texts. One of the texts comes across as more conversational, while the other is more academic in nature. This led to a question directed at Dr Richards, on the importance of publishing in academic journals. Dr. Richards explained that being published in an academic journal with a fairly good reputation carries a lot of weight in academia, as it speaks towards an educator's credibility as well as helping the author remain fresh within their field.

He highlighted that despite a drive to being published, it is important that the work is up to standard and worth publishing. The impact, influence and relevance of a piece of work is more important than just being published.



**Q: Can you elaborate on the different “tiers” of journals and describe their importance for academic publishing.**

Dr Richards explained that academic journals have various levels of respected journals, with top-tier journals identified by their rejection rates. Within the field of Criminal Justice, he adds, the rejection rate is 93% for top-tier journals.

**Q: Is any feedback given during rejection that might be used to revise and resubmit an article? What are some possible reasons for rejection?**

Dr Richards answered that it may not always be the case, although there are many instances when feedback is given. Nevertheless, he advises novice publishers to submit their work to the most highly regarded publishers first, in the case that feedback is indeed given. For those wanting to hone their writing style, he also suggested that it can be helpful to find the most oft-cited authors and study their styles of writing. Both panelists recommended reaching out to highly regarded academics for those just starting out in the field in order to start a dialogue and ask for some guiding tips.

In terms of reasons for rejection, Dr Richards stated that this can depend on the sources that are cited in an article. He explained that there is generally a three-year rule in sources that are drawn from and, therefore, advises researchers to keep their sources as recent and relevant as possible. Secondly, he added that rejection can depend on the type of research that peer reviewers look for, for example a preference for quantitative or qualitative methodologies. He concluded by stressing the importance of reviewing the editor’s requests in terms of writing styles because adhering to the necessary formatting can also make or break the acceptance of a submission.

**Q: Does the frequency with which someone is cited matter?**

Dr Richards explained that even though getting published is the overall goal and a feat on its own, it is also important to have your work cited. This gives an idea of how well regarded someone’s research is within their field and speaks towards the impact it has. He added that impact factors matter when considering tenure or hiring positions as this also helps to gauge whether the research has influenced policy making.

To close, Ms Warnick addressed some of the technicalities and challenges of writing academically.

She highlighted the fact that some top-tier Western journals remain rather strict when it comes to the standards of English that can be used, namely either UK or US English. She added that although there is growing awareness of the development of English in its different streams within different regions, the majority of publications still only accepted the UK or US standards. For this reason, both panelists reiterated the necessity of having work proofread before submission in order to ensure proper presentation and punctuation.

## **Q&A session with Dr Caroline Varin, Helena Hurd, and Rachel Warnick**

**Q: [To Helena Hurd] What has motivated you to strive to improve the diversity of voices in publishing at Routledge and what do you think still needs to be done to achieve those goals?**

Ms Hurd replied that any publisher doing their job right wants to reflect the best voices within the field they are publishing. She believes this can only be achieved with the proper representation of global voices. Given that her subject area is African Studies, she believes it is imperative to promote the voices from within Africa, as these are more equipped to speak about their own context than Western voices. She continued by emphasising her belief that this applies beyond her subject areas as well, stating that she has been striving to embed such practices company-wide. Her conclusion is that in order to move forward as a world, we need to be better at listening to and promoting voices from all over the globe and ensure that the relevant voices are coming through and being heard.

**Q: What is the importance of being a first author and does the position of one's name in the authorship arrangement matter?**

Dr Richards answered that this is usually relevant with more than two authors because being first author generally comes with the assumption that the majority of the research has been conducted by said author.

**Q: Would it be a good idea to hire a third-party proof-reading service before submitting your work for publication?**

Dr Varin answered that it is certainly a good option when it is an affordable service.

However, she also made a variety of free service suggestions that can be explored prior to paid services e.g., Grammarly, Google docs as well as taking a look at the [free courses](#) assembled by Prowibo to improve writing (on p. 4 of the [Publishing in Academia toolkit](#)). Dr Varin, Dr Richards and Ms Hurd also all reiterated the benefits of having your work peer reviewed prior to submission.

Dr Richards added that spellcheck should not be the only thing that is relied on, substantiating Dr Varin's stance that hiring a third-party proof-reader can be a good choice if it is an affordable option. He emphasised that nothing compares to simply reading as much as possible when striving to increase vocabulary.

**Q: How important is it to cite the prevalent authors in the field of your research?**

Ms Hurd maintained that this is extremely important, as it speaks towards the knowledge of the subject under investigation. Therefore, she suggested that researchers find the most relevant contributors to their subject areas and make sure to cite them in their research. Dr Varin added that it is imperative to keep work original as well as cite correctly when the ideas of other scholars are being drawn upon.

**Q: How to find a good mentor**

Ms Warnick answered that attributes of good mentors include someone who will listen and guide rather than explicitly dictate mentees in the steps that need to be taken. She stated that mentors should be there to shine a light for and support their mentees. She also cautioned respect for the time of mentors and, therefore, advised mentees to outline an agenda and know specifically what they are looking for out of a mentoring relationship e.g., expertise in a field of research, help in networking, help in career progression. She added that mentorships can also be reversed, meaning that mentors may receive benefit from the relationship as well. For example, mentors can learn about how their teaching methods are being received by and impact students.

**Q: Many journals have different methods of manuscript write-up- Why is there no universal standard method?**

When being rejected by a journal or book, often all of the references and structures have to be re-written along with possibly reshaping some of the research ideas.

Speaking on book publishing, Ms Hurd pointed out that the author is generally given more leeway in terms of referencing style as long as it is used consistently throughout the entire work. However, she explained that journals tend to set their own style that must be followed. Additionally, different subject areas prefer different referencing styles, particularly when it comes to scientific writing as opposed to humanities and social sciences writing.

Dr Varin agreed, adding that there is a matter of branding among publishers – with each of them having their own brand, particularly among journals. Hence, adhering to their style makes it explicit that a piece of work is being submitted in accordance with their brand. She continued by pointing out that when a manuscript is being sent off in an attempt for publication, there is an etiquette regarding how many publishers it can be sent to.

Ms Hurd addressed the above by explaining that publishers generally prefer work to be submitted only to one journal or publisher at a time and wait for the process to run its course before submitting again. She stated that this rule is adhered to quite strictly for journal article submissions, although with book publishing it is more acceptable to approach different publishers. Nevertheless, she added that publishers should be informed when work is being submitted to more than one publisher.

# CONCLUSION

The conference ended with Dr Caroline Varin, CEO of Professors Without Borders commenting on the necessity to improve access to knowledge for all and to work as a community to achieve such ends. As a result, she praised all members of the webinar for coming together for the purposes of helping each other out, amplifying voices and sharing knowledge.

Professors Without Borders would like to thank all panelists and audience members for their time and contributions to this event.

