

Essay

It's not Just the Author: The Reader and the Editor Are Dead, Too

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Abstract: The world of academic publishing has changed significantly. In this short essay, I attempt to offer a few observations as the editor of an international journal, suggesting that we may need to have a more in-depth theoretical engagement with current publishing practices. This includes the diminishing role of editors, the nature of authorship and the related review process, and the ways in which the publishing industry responds to, and shapes, our academic publishing practices.

Keywords: academic publication; publishing practices; production of knowledge

1. Introduction

There is little argument. As Barthes would have it, the author is dead and the reader lost in semiotics [1]. However, what roles do publishers and editors play in these textual killing fields? As businesses, publishers in general, and academic journal publishers in particular, are not exempt from late capitalist practices. With their headquarters in the global North and their production staffs fragmented across the global South, they follow some of the established models of other multinational corporations. In addition, I argue that beyond concerns about the fragmentation of labor, ever-changing academic publishing practices help further fragment knowledge through a number of cost/revenue-focused policies. This affects the roles played by editors, as well as the quality and nature of published materials. From my perch, I am concerned that the role played by editors has been systematically reduced to what I label a textual traffic controller. In many cases, editors play an important role in deciding where, how, when, and even if a text lands. After that, its taxiing (the production process, including the proofreading phase) and arrival at a designated gate (*i.e.*, specific

issue/volume) are no longer their concern. Does this mean that in the age of “rapid” mechanical production, the “aura” of the text has been lost? If editors are given a limited role in assembling journal volumes/issues, does this give the readers even more power over the produced texts, allowing them to assemble articles from different sources (*i.e.*, journals) to create/assert a world of polyvalent post-production meanings, and in the process re-appropriate the work of authors and editors? Finally, if the author and the reader are one and the same in academic publication, does this mean that the only corpse left is that of the editor?

In what follows, I hope to offer a few observations as a journal editor. My intention is not to devalue academic publishing; I simply hope to offer a more nuanced view of its changing nature.

2. Reflections

The number of academic authors has grown exponentially over the last decade. Asian, African, Eastern European and Latin American authors have joined their European and North American counterparts to produce a cacophony of academic voices on every imaginable topic. To capture and “serve” this market, the number of academic journals has grown accordingly. At times, journals thematically overlap, and particular topics are privileged and endowed with numerous journals (e.g., transportation). As the global community of scholars produces more articles in order to survive the growing demand for tenure and promotion, publishers receive more commodities with varying use and exchange values. In other words, with little marketing or pressure from publishers, academics deliver their “work” to publishers. In turn, publishers sell this scholarship, in digital or hardcopy format, back to the very institutions that promoted their production! Very few businesses benefit from such a model of self-contained production and consumption. Institutions encourage their faculty members to publish and then pay for the databases that contain their articles, so that they can read and produce more. In such a market, while publishers still worry about the quality, the speed of production becomes equally important. With some compromises in quality, more authors/readers can be accommodated, and more articles can be produced and disseminated. However, as I suggest next, something important gets lost in the process: intellectual coherence.

3. (Post) Fordist Production of Text

Not too long ago, accepted articles would be published online, awaiting assignment to specific hardcopy issues. While academics could read them, citation was somewhat complicated, since these articles were not yet assigned a volume, an issue, or page numbers. Since citations are the bread and butter of a journal and its publishers, a solution was presented about two years ago. It was called Article-Based Publication (ABP), and it marked the dawn of a new era. Articles accepted for publication would be sequentially assigned to a volume (issues vanished) and were given page numbers according to when they were published. While this change may sound innocuous, it creates an inherent problem that requires consideration. Traditionally, editors were involved in the post-production assembly of articles. They even reviewed the corrected proofs to make sure that the final changes did not affect the quality of the article. However, the urge to publish quickly removed the editors from post-acceptance activities. The most troubling impact of ABP was the loss of another important role played by the editors. They used to examine the accepted articles, assemble each issue by putting as many related articles together as

possible, and determine the table of contents to give each issue the needed coherence. This even encouraged some colleagues to write editorials related to one or more of the themes in an issue. This role is not required in the new fast-paced publishing world. However, authors are happy with the speed of the review and the publication process, as are publishers who can market a higher volume of publications.

4. Linguistic Submission

Connected with the dilemma of speed and the increasing number of authors is the significant growth in the number of articles submitted for review. This does not necessarily translate to a higher quality of articles. It simply means that a journal that received 200–300 articles five years ago can be dealing with as many as 600–700 articles now. The expectation for rapid review and publication, meanwhile, remains the same. That removes any motivation for the editors to help authors whose articles are potentially publishable with some guidance and direct intervention (even some language editing). Authors, particularly those from the global South, used to benefit from this kind of editorial devotion to the production of knowledge. This process also allowed editors to help break the traditional divides between the geographies of knowledge production and consumption. As submission rates double and triple, little time is left for such a valuable service.

5. Colonial and Post-Colonial Practices

Editors of international journals have the distinct displeasure of observing colonial practices in the production of text. This practice is multilayered and requires detailed deconstruction. For the purpose of this short essay, however, I can offer two observations. First, it is clear that the costly components of production have been moved to countries outside the global North. It is not unusual for editors to work with staff from South Asia and other English speaking countries, mostly sites of previous colonial practices. Second, as the number of authors from countries in the global South increases, the number of reviewers from the same regions remains small. This occurs because authors from some countries hesitate to review other manuscripts, either due to linguistic challenges or academic discomfort. This results in a condition where text produced in the global South is mostly reviewed by scholars outside this region, creating a class of academic subalterns, whose texts are examined and controlled mostly by reviewers from the global North. By the time the editor and the reviewers (the first set of readers) are done, the author has been appropriately “disciplined”. This double colonial practice means that the text is given legitimacy in the global North and then sent to the global South for its mechanical production. In this process, I am not sure who is dead and who is alive: the author, the editor, the reviewer, or the reader? What remains is the scene of the crime, a macabre textual landscape we call a journal.

6. Whose Language Is It Anyway?

Historically, journals have offered language/copyediting services that created uniform quality. This service further “disciplined” authors, native and non-native speakers alike, to capitulate and follow the “suggested” changes. However, some journals have moved away from that practice. It is now the responsibility of authors to have their articles edited before they are accepted for publication. It is the duty of the editor to remind authors about this important step before their papers are published. This

clearly gives native speakers an advantage; with some focus and limited help from colleagues, they can get their articles ready for publication in a timely manner. For non-English speakers, however, this creates the task of finding a native-speaker volunteer (who may or may not be equipped to edit an academic paper) or pay for this service. When the author lives in a country where the fee for editing is close to an academic's monthly salary, this is not an easy task. For those cases, editors either have to step in (if they are informed of the financial burden) or ask for help from the publisher. After all, an accepted article cannot go to waste!

7. Who Will Read All These Articles?

As the number of articles has increased exponentially, the number of reviewers has remained somewhat constant. As suggested earlier, this is partially caused by the increasing number of international authors, particularly from places where scholars are less willing to review. However, this problem cannot be squarely put at the doorstep of the global south. As many editors will attest, finding willing reviewers for the growing number of articles is difficult and disheartening. At times, potential reviewers let us know that they are overwhelmed by the number of assignments and requests they receive. If article submission grows at the current rate (or even higher), a new category needs to be added to editorial decision: withdrawn for lack of willing reviewers.

8. How Many Case Studies Does It Take to Produce Knowledge?

An important element in the increased number of articles is the burgeoning of case studies. These are typically articles that use known theories and methodologies in various localities or conditions. Urban growth measurement is one such topic. Authors use satellite images from different time periods and apply similar methods to arrive at predictable results. Their only contribution is the showcasing of their selected urban area. The rest is a familiar discussion regarding the lack of adequate planning, leapfrogging, suburbanization, or mismanagement of natural resources. There is also the occasional reference to the loss of farmland and associated problems. Publication of such articles does very little to expand knowledge, either through theory or methodology. However, such articles can contribute greatly to a growing number of citations.

9. How Many Authors Can Fit into One Volume/Issue?

With an increasing number of authors and articles, as well as ABP publication style, the number of issues (or in some cases, volumes) per year has to increase. Imagine a journal that goes from six annual issues with seven articles in each to a journal that publishes 10 issues per year with 10 or more articles in each. Special Issues are the added bonus. As the number of volumes/issues increases, authors get published faster. However, readers cannot catch up and editors face exhaustion. Meanwhile, citations go up and databases sell. In this manner, a specific issue/volume of a journal becomes a storage device; we try to get as many in it as possible. Given that most readers have abandoned the practice of browsing entire journal issues in favor of individual articles, it may not matter how many articles are in one issue. Neither the authors, nor the readers, care. Editors are equally without a voice in this process. So why do we still have volumes and issues? Why not have one volume per year and append the accepted articles to

the end until 31 December? For whom do we publish bounded academic journals, if the individual articles appear in the order they were accepted and not the academic coherence that relates them? If there are still libraries that demand hardcopies, let's send them the annual anthologies of randomly queued knowledge.

10. Where Is Walter Benjamin When You Need Him?

I must confess; I never fully appreciated what Walter Benjamin [2] had to say about the loss of aura in the age of mechanical reproduction. However, I am beginning to see the conditions the post-fordist textual production could produce. While empowering Bathes's readers by allowing them to assemble text and assert their own meaning and coherence (which in academic publication appears as literature review in the next cycle of textual production), the mechanical reproduction of text has also led to a condition that could be equated with the loss of artistic aura. The absence of coherent journal issues (with the exception of special issues) and searchable engines for finding articles related to one's narrow disciplinary interests means that there is no longer a chance for browsing. Passing "strange and wonderful" is no longer an option.

Bounded coherent journals are more than nostalgia. They were the last textual emporiums (or arcades if you will), where one went to find a specific text, but found others around it as well. How often did readers end up fortuitously reading an article that was not on their search list, simply because it was in the same issue where a targeted article resided? The textual meandering of the reader and the potential for textual place-making that was a journal were lost once the digital production process sacrificed bounded journals in favor of articles. Journals turned into storage spaces for commodified knowledge for specific consumers. Browsing and window shopping were eliminated. The online shopping experience for articles through library databases became eerily akin to shopping for retail items. When you decide to buy one item (or download an article), the website will suggest others like it! Doesn't this limit tastes, and for academics, narrow their field of knowledge?

11. Nostalgia Is a Trip through a Past That Never Was

None of what I have described here could occur without our collective agency and complacency. As consumers of text, the author and the reader alike capitulate to the established process. This manifests itself in the repeated question all editors face from time to time: "how fast can you process my article?" I have never received an email from an author objecting to the specific location of his/her article in an issue or a volume. Academics need publication for the tenure process. All that matters is being published in high impact journals, and high impact journals need more articles to generate the citations they need.

The author may be dead, but s/he keeps returning as a textual zombie. As academics, authors devour text in order to produce more. They also partake in the process of turning new authors into zombies, as they consume their brains and discipline them in the "art" of producing text. In this scenario, publishers provide the spaces for the zombies to roam and the editors are there to direct the zombies to their destinations. When one journal is not enough to accommodate all the articles in a singular academic topic, there will be other journals with similar titles created and more editors recruited. The more the merrier: the more published, the more cited; the more cited, the more published; and the cycle continues.

There is but one way out of this “Z” world: we must acknowledge that quality is more important than quantity. We need to rethink the tenure and publication process. Academics do have agency. It is not entirely the fault of publishers. We want them to create more journals, hire more editors and get our articles published faster. We want personalized attention, while demanding expediency. Perhaps we should remember that if publishing is an academic drug, it is not the dealer who should be blamed. Consumers are the creators of this market. They are as much to blame as the ones making money off their habits. There is no arguing that production of knowledge matters, but the emerging ecologies need coherence and proven value. Unfortunately, that means limited publication, limited citations, and limited money to be made. That future is too scary to consider for all parties involved: the dead authors, lost readers and dazed editors.

References

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