

Editorial

Planning for Academic Publishing after Retirement

Stephen K. Donovan ^{1,2}

¹ Taxonomy and Systematics Group, Naturalis Biodiversity Center, Postbus 9517, 2300 RA Leiden, The Netherlands; Steve.Donovan@naturalis.nl; Tel.: +31-71-751-9642

² Department of Earth Sciences, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, NB E3B 5A3, Canada

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Abstract: Many academics retire, yet continue to tread a well-worn research path. In contrast, retirement may also be a time for reinvention and changes in direction—place, name, institutional links, where to publish, and what to review. These changes may be by pursuing a more restricted research agenda, but in a way convenient or interesting to the retiree. In short, the anticipation is that research in retirement will be a lot of fun; may the retiree leave the angst to the professionals.

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1. Introduction

I start this guest editorial with a rant, only a mild one, but a somewhat personal rant nonetheless. Over the 40+ years since I first attended university, I have heard, irregularly and commonly at third hand, that academic X has retired, but has continued to research and publish to ‘complete their life’s work’. Whenever I hear such a tale at third hand, the impression is given that X is to be praised, to be lauded for their perseverance, application, and devotion to their vocation [1].

However, my own assessment of X is less than complimentary. Indeed, is X some sort of fool or charlatan, lacking imagination? The day that I retire—less than three years away as I write this—I will have finished my life’s academic work, surely. Retirement will be a time for change, not perseverance. Any major research left undone, any key papers left unwritten, are likely to remain so. I doubt if this bullish attitude will cause even the smallest of ripples in academic circles. An academic retires; at the host institution (but only if the money is available) a new, young academic is appointed to the vacant post; and the cycle continues.

In retirement, being a publishing retiree should not be a prime concern, although it will be a lesser part of life. A retiree will surely have other things to fill their time—family, travel, and so forth. They may continue to research and to write, but only as a side-line and no more than a hobby; they are un beholden to any organization or timetable. In retirement, research should be fun, otherwise why would you do it? What are those research directions not explored? Why not examine them now? You are not getting any younger.

I retire in less than three years’ time and have been contemplating the reinvention of my research strategy. I have devised a five-point plan to guide the new retiree in this Brave New World which I share with you herein. I write this for two reasons, partly because it may be of some general interest, but also because I am fishing. I am not retired, yet, but it looms ever closer. Other readers will have retired and will know the truth (or otherwise) of my proposal. I would love to hear from readers who can improve, or even have already improved, on my simple scheme.

2. Place

For a start, in retirement, is it necessary to haunt the halls of your old institution? While I can see the attractions and even advantages, there is also much to favour a clean break. For example, I am a

geologist by training, but have always had an interest in industrial archaeology. A clean break will support such a change in research direction, if so chosen.

I intend to move back across the North Sea, probably to northwest England, and may settle far from any university or museum, but, and more importantly, close to my 'support group', my partner and children. I will seriously need to reduce the size of my personal research library—I have already worked out the broad details of what stays and what goes (some has already gone)—and aim to be as self-contained as is possible. That is, any research will be constrained; I doubt that I will have the energy or desire to maintain my present breadth of interests. A tighter focus will be both sensible and a necessity.

3. Name

This decision is a personal one and may appear somewhat eccentric, but hear me out. Ever since my first published paper [2], I have been S.K. Donovan or Stephen K. Donovan. This consistency is convenient for the modern fad of h-indices and the like, where names are cited and plucked into computer databases. From there it is possible to proclaim that I have an index value of some number or other, which can be bandied about as an assessment of my worth without actually reading any of my publications. In this way, the published output of a researcher is reduced to a single integer without paying any attention to what they actually have to say. This is a strange academic curse of the 21st Century, but sadly true.

In retirement, my h-index will have no relevance to me or anyone else and it will not be required to inform any sort of administrative task. In an attempt to shake off this particular shackle, I intend to confuse the issue and change the way that I write my name on my papers. I shall reinvent myself as Kenneth Donovan or S. Kenneth Donovan, still the same character, but placing a new emphasis on my second Christian name. If this simple change of emphasis gives just one computer program indigestion, I shall be well satisfied. The important things are the research and publication, not the bibliographic measurements. Stephen K. Donovan is a geologist, S. Kenneth Donovan may be an industrial archaeologist and I see no reason to consolidate their respective outputs for the sake of a metric of academic accountancy.

4. Institutional Links

My hypothetical academic X maintains a physical link with their former research institution—university, museum or whatever—and carries on as if they still have a salaried post. In contrast, I promote separation as the retiree moves in a new research direction.

I propose a new independence in cutting adrift from close association with any academic institution and return to the ranks of the unconnected, namely the amateurs. I see many reasons to either maintain links or to sever them, and which is favoured is a matter of balance and taste. To examine just one of the advantages of institutional association, those without an institutional link will not have access to university or museum library facilities. Yet, in the 21st Century, will this be significant? Any retired researcher will have access to their own research library and the freedom to request pdfs from authors. Papers are increasingly available for free via open access [3]. I will keep my memberships of a select few scientific societies, which will keep me up-to-date with their journals and will give me online access to their archives. I note how much bibliographic information I can access online when out of office and wonder how much will be so in the future? I fancy more rather than less.

One obvious disadvantage for retirees with an institutional link will be a requirement to file some sort of academic report, at least annually. So, it is a swings or roundabouts situation: a retired academic without an institutional link will save themselves at least this task, yet will lose advantages such as access to the library and equipment. It will take fine judgment to retain all necessary compensations without suffering the disadvantages.

5. Where to Publish

Reinvention as a more self-contained academic will still involve publication. I like writing, but I shall undoubtedly write less and publish less, and that will involve further changes in my publishing habits.

'Habits' is a good word when discussing academic publishing. We all publish in a cluster of journals, although this cluster will change with time. Publishing in academia tracks the best journals, although these change with time, too, as do the writers. In retirement, I shall continue a trend that I have followed for several years and contrary to the norm, publishing more in local journals, whether peer reviewed or not, and easing off of the treadmill that leads inexorably to the international, peer-reviewed journals. I publish in both at present and it could be contended that some of my 'local' papers could, perhaps should have appeared in higher profile publications. But the pursuit of high-profile publishing has skewed the output of many academics in one direction, perhaps somewhat narrower than of old. I would argue that adding breadth to your published output means that you will reach a greater diversity of readers. I consider this a good thing, but audience is not a current academic objective.

By patronizing smaller journals that are commonly published by local scientific, philosophical or historical societies, the retiree shall be doing the broader academic community a service by supporting some of those that may be struggling. The journals published by the big publishing houses are unlikely to go to the wall, at least in our lifetimes; Elsevier, Springer, Wiley-Blackwell et al. all seem to be doing just fine, thank you. They publish high-profile journals that student and professional academics should be publishing in with some regularity.

But there is a wealth of minor journals that are each published by a parent society. I suggest that the retiree should want to support these publications, particularly as my impression is that many struggle for copy. Once I am retired, they will be the focus of my publishing efforts. If I publish with any consistency, then I intend to devote my efforts towards four or five such journals. I hope it will be a welcome treat for their editors to receive regular copy, and my expectation is to keep the readership informed and entertained about some of the research questions that interest me. Such journals are an essential component of the academic landscape, but they are being short-changed by current attitudes.

6. Reviewing

Reviewing comes in two flavours, proposals and research papers. My suspicion is that many academics are offered few grant proposals to review and accept even less. My personal assessment is that, after retirement, I shall not be applying for research support and so my interest in proposals will be even less, trending to zero. One less potential task will be gratefully discarded.

But research papers are different. At a time when so many professional academics are too busy (or too disorganized or too lazy) to review papers, I gobble them up. Reviewing can be, should be a pleasure, a chance to have a positive input to the publication process. I have reviewed 18 papers in the first 9+ months of this year and the next two typescripts are waiting my attention. I may not accept all the papers that I am offered for review, but I do say yes to many.

How will things change in my retirement? First, the hardware. I will need to buy my own equipment: a printer, as I only review hard copy; and a flatbed scanner, to enable me to make a pdf of the marked copy. Once I am so organized, I do not anticipate any necessity to change the volume of my reviewing, assuming that I am still wanted by editors.

This attitude may appear at variance with some of my more bullish declarations, but any academic should regard reviewing as a positive and informative process [3]. The reviewer sees the latest research before it is published. Reviewing a paper means that they read it in detail and in full. They will be able to guide authors to avoid common failings, for example, to write more informative abstracts and not to repeat words from their title in the key words. Reviewing can be fun if you take the right attitude. So, why should our retiree not have some reviewing fun in retirement?

So, to recap, I consider retirement to be a time of change, a junction where the academic can continue to walk the same path as they have for 30–40 years or, more excitingly, to reinvent themselves. Personally, I look forward to retaining a (reduced) academic profile while moving in a new direction or two while I retain some old interests. Possible changes are various: break ties with a former institution; move away to another area; change the way that the author’s name is cited; publish in low-profile research journals; and happily review manuscripts. It should be a lot of fun, so come along for the ride.

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