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# Random Ramblings-Peer Reviewing of Articles from Third World Countries: My Personal Experience

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Dekker, Wiley, Cambridge, Princeton, MIT, Oxford, etc. are up to.

So without letting you in on my recommendations for winners and honorable mentions (they won't be announced until the Awards Luncheon at the **PSP Annual Conference** in early February), here are some impressions of the state of science and math book publishing for not only professional and undergraduate audiences, but also for the general reading public. But before I delve into the books on my office and garage floors, let me say that I could spend the rest of this column talking about how it's a miracle that so many of them get published in the first place. Consider the dominance of journals in providing profits for the academic/research publishing industry and the myriad distractions that keep even the educated public from having any time to read books. It all seems so hopeless, until you tell yourself that these books must fill needs, whether they involve business or pleasure. You can put the doom and gloom aside, I tell myself, as I go through each of the book piles in search of whatever trends I can perceive.

Speaking of doom and gloom, it seemed to me on first pass through the book piles that this year there are fewer titles devoted to bleak general assessments of our planet's environmental future. On the whole, topics that the books in the environmental science pile address seem

more narrowly focused, while being treated in the depth offered by hundreds of pages. There's a book on the ecological future of Martha's Vineyard, for example. Among the popular science titles, there is only one that offers a look into a future of world-wide environmental ruin. Not that the subject, painted with a broad brush, has outlived its usefulness for informing specialist and general readers. Instead, it may be that publishers have moved on from the notion that such books will win prizes.

Overall, the quality of the books I receive remains as high as it has been for the past decade-plus that I've been judging them. What strikes me as different this year is that there don't seem to be any individual titles that I can latch onto at first blush as being in the running for top prizes in the PROSE competition. Of course, it can happen that upon further review over the five or six weeks I spend with the books, those that make a powerful first impression make way for more outstanding titles. In any case, my favorite type of book is one that combines observations made while working in the field with analysis made in the office or laboratory.

For just about all the titles I see, quality, in terms of covers and paper stock, remains as high as ever, even as some publisher use soft, rather than hard, covers for hefty academic titles. Color isn't used lavishly in most monographs, or in the even upper-level textbooks, that I see, but I don't get the impression that publishers shy away from color when it's necessary. One way or another, publishers deal with the extra cost for color when a book depends on it.

This year, there seems to be a good mix of contributed titles and books with a single or two or three authors. I do expect, as happens every year, to find authors who are famous stars in their fields, either in academia or in the general culture or in both. For example, this time around, **Yuval Peres** has co-authored two academic math books that are in the competition. He's a well known principal researcher at Microsoft's Theory Group and a Berkeley adjunct. Apparently, he's not so tied down by his day job and journal-article commitments, that he can't find the time to write books.

Some years ago, I split popular science and math books from academic titles, in order to level the playing field, so to speak. As usual, the pile of popular titles is the tallest on my office floor, despite the fact that books for general audiences are far slimmer than academic titles. As in previous years, while some unexpected topics are featured (as soon as my wife spotted a book on sleep, she grabbed it and quickly devoured it), there's a generous supply of math titles. I guess there's a stable market for these math books. What I don't know is whether it's growing or if the same individuals have such affection for math books that they buy whatever they come across in bookstores or in advertisements.

A market that may not be growing is the need for multi-volume reference science works in print. The four print sets that I received this year constitute the lowest number ever. Whether that's a dip or a trend, I'll have to wait and see. 🌱

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## Random Ramblings — Peer Reviewing of Articles from Third World Countries: My Personal Experience

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**P**eer reviewing of articles from Third World countries has posed challenges for me since I often encounter articles whose intellectual content is excellent but have flaws that work against their acceptance because of the obstacles that these authors face. I review library science publications for four journals. I enjoy doing so and have received more articles than many because I say "yes" when editors ask me. Editors have provided positive feedback. They tell me that many authors find my comments useful. In addition, I usually complete my reviews well before the deadline. I don't have an exact count, but I would guess that I annually peer review about fifteen publications.

I would estimate that more than half the authors of these papers reside in Third World countries. I am using the term "Third World" as the best way to designate those countries outside the Euro-centric/North American orbit since the term has less of a political connotation after the fall of the Soviet Empire. I am also not using it to designate poverty or underdevelopment since many of the countries are rich

enough to support a higher education system that rewards scholarly publishing. I have primarily reviewed papers from Nigeria, the richer and more stable Middle Eastern countries, and India/Pakistan. Editors have sent me very few papers from China, which is surprising given the sense that the Chinese government is working very hard to increase the scholarly reputation of its higher education system. My hypothesis is that these efforts have focused on the STEM disciplines with less attention paid to areas like library science.

I recognize that my impressions have absolutely no statistical validity because of the very limited sample size and the fact that I'm lumping together a variety of countries and regions. As with many of my columns, my goal is to pose questions, invite others to think about the issue, and hope that someone can prove or disprove my "ramblings" with valid research. I would suggest, however, that research on peer reviewing is more difficult because the process is confidential in most cases so that any data would be difficult to obtain. Even if

a journal editor has access to a broad range of decisions, analyzing the data poses the possibility of "outing" authors in a way that might discourage future submissions.

### Major Problems

This section will be short. While many factors make an article unacceptable for publication, I have encountered only one that consistently eliminates articles from Third World countries but is rarely found in Euro-centric/North American publications that I review. Some Third World authors include recommendations and observations in the conclusion that are not justified by the research in the main body of the article and appear to come out of thin air. My hunch is that these points are important enough to the authors that they include them even when the research methodology or survey results do not provide the grounds to do so. These articles also usually exhibit some or

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all of the minor problems to be considered in the next section.

### Minor Problems

In this section, I'll consider three problems that make it hard to recommend for publication what are otherwise worthwhile articles — problems that are closely related to the fact that the author resides in a Third World country.

**Lack of context.** I often have difficulty in evaluating articles from Third World countries because I don't have the needed context about libraries in their country as well as the broader culture. I realize that this statement reveals a heavy dose of cultural arrogance because I don't expect the same information from American publications and usually know enough about other Euro-centric areas to get by. Even here, however, I have had some minor problems where, for example, British authors have divergent library vocabulary, different governance structures, and alternative traditions of library service. I justify this intolerance by telling myself that the publications that I peer review are intended for an American audience even when this is not completely true due to a significant number of international subscriptions.

Even more importantly, the value of the article often is linked to learning more about how the Third World country has adopted and adapted a library practice for different circumstances. For example, I am curious about how librarians and library users in Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, and India use social media in the library. Including a more detailed discussion of the cultural milieu will also help librarians in other countries, including those in Euro-centric/North American world, learn how to provide better library service if these librarians have to deal with similar issues. For example, an article about how librarians in Pakistan respect cultural norms about the status of women in promoting the use of social media would be useful not only in other Islamic countries like Egypt or Indonesia but also for French librarians whose user communities include a significant number of Muslims.

Another issue is that Third World articles are less likely to provide significant details about library size, academic programs, and other important details. I know that **Harvard** and **Cambridge** have important libraries that support high-level research and teaching. My personal knowledge does not extend to knowing which Indian libraries occupy the same niche in their country.

In both cases where more context is important, I don't blame the author. In the same way that I don't provide enough context for readers in the Third World because I'm not as knowledgeable as I should be about what won't be clear to these readers, these authors may not know where their local conditions are significantly different from elsewhere to the degree that their scholarship is difficult to understand. I consider it part of my role as a peer reviewer to point out where additional in-

formation is necessary for comprehension in an international journal. The journal editor should also provide any needed additional guidance.

**The Literature Review.** The literature review is a key part of the traditional scholarly article. Guidelines often ask the reviewer to evaluate if the author has left out any significant publications. Meeting this guideline is virtually impossible for broad subjects such as open access, social media, informational literacy, and many others where at best a highly selective summary is possible.

From the articles that I've seen, the literature review presents particular problems for the Third World author. In many of the papers, this section is often short. Even worse, the articles are often dated. Most articles written in 2005 on the topics named above have little relevance in 2017, but many Third World authors include such citations in the articles that I've reviewed. I'm quite certain that the issue is lack of access to current research. The library sciences indexing and abstracting services, especially those with full text, are too expensive for the limited number of users in a relatively poor Third World university.

I propose three increasingly radical solutions. First, the author could seek out open access publications in institutional repositories or through Internet searching. Discovery is the problem since finding relevant publications this way isn't as easy as using the traditional tools. As a reviewer, I know that including everything is impossible so that citing a reasonable number of current publications no matter where they were found would impress me more than citing and quoting from articles that are most likely no longer relevant. Second, the author could decide explicitly to concentrate on finding papers of special relevance to the paper at hand. I would expect authors to find papers about the topic from their own country and would mark the article down if I happened to know about any omissions. Even better would be finding papers relevant to the special issues for Third World countries on the topic. In this case, older papers might still be important. I don't know if discussion lists exist for Third World librarians, but they could be an important resource as could be networking with professional colleagues. As the international library association, perhaps **IFLA** might have some mechanisms to help the author. Third, the author might omit the literature review. The value of most Third World papers is treating a subject from a national/local perspective that provides a fresh viewpoint for readers in the Euro-centric/North American world. As a reader, I don't care if the authors have global mastery of the subject but rather that they have selected an important topic and an appropriate research methodology to arrive at useful discussion of the special issues and solutions arrived at in their country.

**English Language.** The quality of the English is almost always a stumbling block for non-native English speakers and even for articles from countries where the local English does not conform completely to Euro-Centric/North American rules. In most cases, the text is understandable but not acceptable for publication because "understandable" is not good

enough for a scholarly publication. Let me add here that I have great sympathy for these authors. I'm functionally bilingual in French, but I know that I would not be able to write a scholarly article in that language without making many small mistakes that would not affect comprehension but would lead to a valid rejection.

These language mistakes go beyond simple copy editing. I once judged an article of such importance to the literature for its insights that I told the editor that I would be willing to "correct" the English. While the article was not exceptionally long, I spent about ten hours on this task. I found only one or two cases where I wasn't reasonably sure that my edits weren't distorting the meaning. In part because of this experience, I don't believe that the journal editor should be responsible for such substantive changes though I often recommend that the editor copy edit for minor problems.

Another option is to hire an editing service. Based on the advertising emails that I've received, I initially thought that such services would be cost prohibitive. I was surprised, however, to learn that some reasonably rated services would edit a 3,000 word manuscript from a non-native English speaker within a week for around \$100. Some even offer to edit a small sample at no charge. In many Third World countries with a reasonably funded system of higher education, the institution might be willing to pay for such editing. Perhaps the journal editor would do the same for an especially impressive article. Finally, the eventual economic benefit to the author might be such to justify paying for the editing from personal funds if doing so would assure the article's acceptance.

### Concluding Thoughts

I decided to write this column for several reasons. First, I believe that the value of the content of an article is the most important evaluation criterion. Many of the authors of the articles that I review provide important new knowledge that is not available elsewhere and would have been published if the authors had not encountered the special problems from living in a Third World country. Second, readers in the Euro-centric/North American world should have the opportunity to discover that their viewpoints, library issues, problems, and solutions are not universal and that they can learn from the experiences of these authors. Third, this scholarship could prove useful to those who plan to work in, visit, or help Third World libraries and their librarians. Too often, those in the Euro/North American centric world believe that exporting or, even worse, imposing their way of librarianship is the best solution everywhere.

My recounting of my experiences with peer reviewing a limited number of articles from Third World librarians will obviously not resolve the challenges that these authors face. This column may, however, encourage editors, reviewers, and readers to become more sympathetic to their scholarly efforts and perhaps look for solutions so that Third World research in library issues becomes more available in the Euro-centric/North American world. 🍌