The History and the Future of Scholarly Society Journals: A Back Chat with Fadhilaturrahmi

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Abstract

Fadhilaturrahmi (Arabic: فَضِيلَةُ الرَّحْمِ), an Indonesian educator and lecturer nor author, editor, and reviewer in educational research, knows the history of scholarly publishing and its many implications for the present-day inside and out. She is the founder nor editor-in-chief of the *Jurnal Basicedu* and *Jurnal Abdidas*, also serves as an editor of *Jurnal Review Pendidikan dan Pengajaran* and *Edukatif* and as reviewer for *Jurnal Cendekia*, *Jurnal Pendidikan Tambusai*, and *Jurnal Bola*. She has focused on the publishing and popularization of the sciences from a historical lense. In the below back chat, Fadhilaturrahmi shares an abridged history of journal publishing at scholarly societies and her thoughts on how scholarly publishing's past can influence its present.

Keywords: Future, History, Journal, Scholar,

Introduction

Open Access (OA) policies and initiatives introduced in recent years, Plan S among the latest, have put increasing emphasis in academia on discussions about what the future of scholarly publishing should look like. There are mounting debates around whether universal OA is an achievable goal, and how publishers should transition journals to OA models. Many scholarly societies, in particular, have expressed concerns that widening OA mandates could compromise their operations because they rely on subscription journal revenues to cover costs.

It seems that the only real consensus among scholarly societies and other stakeholders in the great OA debate is that the way forward isn't obvious, and traversing the developing OA landscape remains a daunting endeavor for many societies. However, despite the absence of a clear path ahead, there is some direction to be gained by retracing the steps taken to get to this point. Most have heard some form of the adage, you can't know where you're going until you know where you've been. For scholarly societies, in particular, looking to the history of society and association journal publishing, which far pre-dates the current predominantly subscription-based and corporate-controlled publishing system, could yield greater perspective in debates around the future of journals and research access.

Fadhilaturrahmi (Arabic: فَضِيلَةُ الرَّحْمِ), an Indonesian educator and lecturer nor author, editor, and reviewer in educational research, knows the history of scholarly publishing and its many implications for the present-day inside and out. She is the founder nor editor-in-chief of the *Jurnal Basicedu* and *Jurnal Abdidas*, also serves as an editor of *Jurnal Review Pendidikan dan Pengajaran* and *Edukatif* and as reviewer for *Jurnal Cendekia*, *Jurnal Pendidikan Tambusai*, and *Jurnal Bola*. She has focused on the publishing and popularization of the sciences from a historical lense. In the below back chat, Fadhilaturrahmi shares an abridged history of journal publishing at scholarly societies and her thoughts on how scholarly publishing's past can influence its present.

Up until the 1960s, societies and university presses were the predominant journal publishers. Can you speak to the early role of societies and universities in publishing and when things started to change?

Scientific journals date back to before we had an academic sector. If you go back to the 17th and 18th centuries you don't at that point have researchers based in universities, what you mostly have are independently wealthy gentlemen who were interested in the sciences — and I use gendered language intentionally here because they were mostly men — who belonged to societies in some cases and in other cases to national academies as a way of getting together with like-minded people. That's where the publishing practices that become scientific journals arose from — separate from universities as we now know them. These groups of early scholars communicated by meeting in person and writing letters to each other, and, they started to publish in journals that they exchanged with individuals and organizations working in similar areas. Journals started out in that milieu — at that time they

were not being produced to sell to a wider public because there wasn't that big an audience for the sorts of research papers being produced. Journals produced by academies like the Royal Society in London or, later, the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia, did not start off in any way like the usual periodical marketplace of, say, newspapers or magazines.

So that's the basic background. Then, the 19th century is when you get the development of specialist disciplines — you get fields like chemistry, geology, physics, and zoology, rather than just natural history and natural philosophy. And you get universities hiring people to be professors in these newly-defined areas, to do research, and — by the end of the 19th century — to form research groups or to run research laboratories within universities. Some of those groups also started to publish journals as well to publicize their work. But at this point, journal publishing was still largely about sharing scholarship among a community of academics. Again, because they did not expect research journals to sell commercially.

In the 1950s and 1960s, that shifted because of changes in research funding after the Cold War. In Europe and, especially, North America, governments started — for various reasons — throwing lots of money at research. That meant more funding for research equipment, for laboratories, for staff, and for libraries. So in that context, there was the possibility that university libraries could actively purchase journals. The other thing that changed is some new publishers started getting in on the game so to speak, such as Robert Maxwell's Pergamon Press. They realised that, if they marketed not just to a single country - not just to France, not just to Britain — but all over the world, then there might be enough subscribers to make research journals commercially successful. And that's really the big moment when academic publishing changed: it internationalized and it commercialized. It's not that the learned societies stopped publishing at that point or that universities stopped publishing, but the huge expansion of journals after the war was driven by commercial publishers. Commercial publishers also saw an opportunity in new fields, like microbiology, for instance, where there weren't already learned societies or journals. So there was a huge range of new disciplinary specializations emerging in the Cold War and that's particularly where new publishers got a foot in the door.

Could you walk through when the idea of library journal subscriptions became mainstream?

If you're looking at research in the 18th century or earlier, the important libraries were those held by the societies and academies; there weren't that many researchers working with universities, so the university libraries were not yet important research resources. And these institutional libraries acquired a large proportion of their holdings through gifts or exchange, in other words, through non-commercial distribution channels. For example, if you go and look in the library of the American Philosophical Society, you'll see that they've got a very good collection of journals from the late 18th and early 19th century that they obtained by exchanging their journals for those of The Royal Society and the Stockholm Royal Academy, and so forth. At the time, organizations like the Royal Society in London were publishers and they also had their own very active libraries. So the Royal Society would send out its publications and receive back as a return gift other organizations' publications and it would stock its library in that way. It is a bit more complicated than that because many of these organizations didn't just swap journals they also gave them away. In the 19th century, for example, the Royal Society was also giving copies to university libraries.

The idea of university libraries as purchasers is a 20th-century concept, and I think that's probably got a lot to do with the expansion of university libraries in the United States. If you look at the expansion of universities and the number of universities being set up across North America in the late 19th century, it's significant. None of these new universities were part of the traditional system of giving away copies, so they started to buy the journals they needed for their libraries. By the time you get to the early 20th century, quite a lot of the British and European learned societies had woken up to the fact that there was a market in North America for journals. It's around that time that they stopped giving copies away to European and British institutions, also because they were beginning to sell them.

You've noted that the concept of making research OA, or free to read, is not necessarily such a new idea since societies once gave copies of their journals away. How is the concept of OA and the potential for it different today as compared to the early days of publishing?

I think that what is distinct about the modern OA debates is the new digital publishing technology. There were certainly efforts to spread knowledge around the world long before we had the ability to publish online. Print is the most obvious one, but it's not the only one. For example, there were efforts in the 1960s to improve the circulation of scientific

knowledge through the use of microfilms — the idea was that libraries that subscribed to journals could make microfilm copies to send other universities by post. It didn't catch on, as not enough people ordered the microfilms. And in the 1980s people thought something similar would happen with CD-ROMs. Again, it didn't really catch on, and then the Internet took over after that.

The thing about finances is, of course, a tricky one. The 18th, 19th, and early 20th century societies and academies that I've been looking at got some sales income, but really not very much. So how did they cover costs? It depends on which organizations we're looking at. In certain countries the answer is funding from the state or the crown — for example, in 18th century France, the king funded the salaries of the members of the academy and funded all of the activities of the academy, including publishing. In the case of Britain, the king didn't do that, but the Royal Society had membership fees, and that gave them some funding. It wasn't enough of course, but as an old organisation that had been going for many years, they had started to build up an endowment, as we would now call it, and so they also had investment income. That combination of membership income and endowment income supported the publication and circulation of research journals for a hundred years or so. With the rapid expansion of science, it started to become more difficult to support the publication of increasing numbers of research papers. That brings us to the 20th century when the British learned societies started to get government support. So there has always been a complex web of funding — you get a bit of money from membership fees, you get a bit of money from investment income, a bit of money from government grants, a little bit of money from sales, and all of that together manages to cover the publishing costs.

It ought to be easier today because now you don't have to pay for the printing, or the paper, or the cost of shipping around the world. So the costs of publishing and circulating knowledge are actually more manageable now than they were back then. You would like to think, in an ideal world, that it would be affordable again for learned societies and academies to publish, through some cunning combination of fundraising and grants.

A lot of the discussion about OA so far has been about trying to keep the current system of publishing going, and maybe using APCs to cover the costs of working with regular publishers. But it would seem to me that what is more likely to be the solution in the long-run is a move away from traditional publishing: if we move to different providers of

publishing services. I suspect that's going to be about some form of digital platforms, it's going to be something that learned societies can decide to use instead of working with a publisher. Right now, I think there are so many new options out there that it is very difficult for a learned society to decide to change from the traditional publisher they have been working with for decades to something else. And with so many new possibilities out there, it's difficult to know where to go.

Are there any examples of OA policies or initiatives that you see today that are particularly promising?

In the UK, we have government funder policies, so there is definitely pressure there, and you could argue that it's actually been quite successful, particularly if you include Green OA. Over the last 15 years or so pretty much every university in the UK has set up its own digital repository and it's becoming standard practice that all academics put their papers into those digital repositories. And that is a big investment when you think about it in terms of the software platforms and also the staff to run them. But it means that we're all still publishing in journals as we always did, we're just also putting a copy onto our university repository — where it's likely not as findable as you would like it to be, because unless you know which university the scholar who wrote that paper was at when they published it, you're not going to know where to find it. So you can see there that government policy clearly did drive change: it has created all of these university repositories, and we can claim that over half of British research is now OA — but how findable is it? That's another question. And I sometimes wonder, if that money had been invested differently, perhaps into a national platform, would we be in a different situation? Because right now we are running two different systems in parallel, the journal publishing system, and the university repository system, and that doesn't seem to be a particularly efficient way of doing things.

Looking to the recent Plan S initiative, you could meet the requirements just by putting research on your university repository with no embargo. Plan S doesn't necessarily change the publishing system as much as some of us would like it to. Some people think it will be dramatic, but from the sort of transformative agreements we've seen so far, it is not clear that they are going to bring about change quickly. If you can meet Plan S by putting your article in a university repository with no embargo, and if there are publishers that will allow that, then it seems like we could just end up going forward with these dual systems.

Whereas I would like to see a change where we are actually re-thinking how the academic publishing landscape works.

For example, I'm a historian and we don't have an arXiv. If I was a physicist then I would almost certainly put all of my papers onto the arXiv and that would be one way of making them OA. If you look at the success of the arXiv and then you look at some of the ideas of having overlay journals on top of that (with peer review), that seems to me like a much more sustainable model of academic publishing to have in the future. It doesn't really have anything to do with funding policies, but you have to wonder if government funding or possibly benevolent trust funding policies might enable this to happen in fields where it hasn't yet, such as history or literature or some of the social sciences.

I think it's hopeful seeing the coalitions that are emerging, particularly among societies. The new Society Publisher's Coalition (SPC) is quite an interesting example. Though right now, I think too many of its representatives are the publishing staff of the societies rather than, say, the president and secretary of the society, so there is a question about whether we're seeing societies as communities of scholars or as businesses with publishing staff. We have also seen libraries coming together, and that's great. But that's not enough until you have buy-in from the researchers as well, and I think that has to involve getting the subject associations and learned societies onboard as communities of scholars. Figuring out OA solutions is going to take collective action. It would be much more powerful if we had groups of learned societies, (in a broad sense meaning all sorts of associations and gatherings of scholars), coming together towards this aim. I think that will help translate high-level policy into group action, rather than just individual action, and that's how change can happen.