

EDITORIAL

The Publishing Gap Between Rich and Poor: the Focus of AuthorAID

Journal of Public Health Policy (2006) 27, 196–203.
doi:10.1057/palgrave.jphp.3200071

Even before we became editors of JPHP, we conceived AuthorAID, a global program to provide developmental editing help to authors from developing countries who want to publish their science and policy writing in competitive journals that influence program and policy locally, regionally, and globally. As we have worked to develop AuthorAID, we learned much more about the problem. We have written this problem description for grant applications as we seek funding to launch this project. As no similar presentation exists in the published literature, we present our understanding of the publishing gap and its causes. See also an update on the current status of AuthorAID within the WFPHA Special Section.

THE PROBLEM

Our Observations

Research and policy debates about how to reduce poverty, improve population health, and hasten development, too often exclude the voices and insights of those closest to the greatest problems. A small but significant part of the inequity manifests itself in the field of scientific publishing. The bulk of what is published in widely read scientific journals, including articles about health in developing countries, is authored by writers associated with institutions in high-income countries. As highly visible journals – BMJ, JAMA, Nature, the New England Journal of Medicine, Science, and The Lancet, to name some of the best known – reach large audiences, including decision-makers at science and development agencies, their influence is notable. Not only are the peer-reviewed, scientific articles they disseminate influential, but their policy-oriented commentaries and editorials also carry great weight. Their impact on poverty and

disease reduction will be felt most in nations with low per capita incomes, yet overwhelmingly, the authors come from or work in affluent countries. A recent analysis, published in *Science*, of 4061 health-related journals from 1992 to 2001 (encompassing 3.47 million peer reviewed articles, notes, and reviews, with collaborating authors in 190 countries) shows that the gap in scientific publications between low-income countries and the rest of the world has grown (1).

A paucity of authors from developing countries in widely read and cited journals may help explain why global health policies tend to be determined with inadequate input from those with first hand experience and understanding. Even when they cover problems in developing countries, journals based in more affluent parts of the world seem to have difficulty in finding authors close to the action. These journals may be missing evidence, analyses, perspectives, and nuance. Consequently, journalists who watch these journals as sources, may provide the public with only limited understanding.

We have no doubt that advocates for poverty reduction efforts would be better armed if they could learn from researchers and scientists in resource-poor environments. Perhaps inadequate evidence and unrepresentative perspectives in widely read journals has further delayed already slow progress toward the 0.7% Gross National Income investment targets for overseas development assistance adopted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (2,3).

Regional and local journals play a similar role, engaging policy makers and a wider public through mass media. Authors who contribute to science and policy usually begin by publishing in local or specialized journals. In middle- and lower-income countries, local researchers help sharpen understanding of problems: how they affect health and development; the knowledge needed to address them more effectively; how progress can be evaluated; and how poverty reduction, health, and development strategies can be improved.

With experience, authors contribute knowledge and public awareness of programs and policies to readers at home, then also regionally, and globally through journals with a broader scope. Well-conceived articles provide greater visibility and recognition of the universal importance of reliable evidence for program and policy decisions.

What Authors and Editors Tell Us

Every author from a developing country with whom we have discussed AuthorAID since 2002 has reinforced our impression of abundant demand for editorial assistance. Locally, there are simply too few editor/scientist mentors (well-published authors or experienced editors) available to assist emerging research talent whose work might be brought to bear on the world's major problems. They have recounted the impediments they encounter while trying to publish their work, especially prevalent in high impact, international journals:

- Uncertainty about which journals may be suitable for a submission.
- Unfamiliarity with editorial conventions.
- Persistent pressure to write in English. (Among the 4061 journals studied, and reported on in *Science* in 2005, 23 languages were represented in at least one publication, but the authors found that 96% of all the publications were in English (1); another study undertaken in approximately the same time period shows that even among authors in Francophone Africa, only 33% of the articles retrieved had been published in French, 66% in English (4).)
- Conflicts with collaborators about authorship and author order.
- Scientific and statistical tools required to analyze data.
- Editors' and publishers' inattention to 'development' topics.

Editors point to many of the same issues. Many acknowledged to us that they sometimes reject submissions from developing country authors even when these show merit. These manuscripts would require additional analytic work by the journal or more editing than they have time to provide (even where the research design and data collection appear to be sound). Other editors lament the paucity of submissions sufficiently broad in scope to warrant international dissemination. Such manuscripts are often rejected by international journals without careful scrutiny of the research design and data collection. Yet every editor believes publication has an impact. Clearly presented articles enhance the work of the scientific community and ease translation of scientific knowledge for application to practice, public education, and policy.

Editors of national and regional journals report that few of them can afford to hire copyeditors. Journal editors from the Forum of

African Medical Editors (FAME) (including James Tumwine of Makerere University, Editor-in-Chief of African Journal of Health Sciences, Ahmabu Bello and Emmanuel A. Ameh, Editor and Assistant Editor of the Annals of African Medicine, based in two different universities in Nigeria) report they do most of this work themselves, leaving little time to assist authors with analytic tasks. Lack of editorial help for authors (and editors) prolongs the review process or results in rejections, on many occasions where the research findings might be useful.

Pippa Smart from International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP) reports that authors submitting to local and regional journals nevertheless frequently expect editors of these journals to do much of the work to prepare their papers for publication. Authors submitting to international journals would be expected to complete these steps prior to submission. Those working to enhance the contribution of African authors to practice and policy within the region note that weak scientific institutions, including journals, contribute not only to flight of scientists, but to authors choosing to publish in journals outside the region. Their articles, if published locally, might guide policy or practice where the findings are most pertinent, but under the current circumstances, they may never be seen by local practitioners or by policy makers (4).

These discussions leave us with little doubt that AuthorAID, a collaboration among authors, editors, publishers, and a new cadre of volunteer, editor/scientist mentors, will be in demand by authors who want to publish in science and policy journals.

The Literature

A growing literature describes efforts to make scientific publications more accessible to readers everywhere in the world. Fewer articles document barriers to higher representation of developing world contributors in scientific and policy-relevant publications. Articles about mentoring and editing, moreover, appear almost exclusively in journals about scholarship and editing, that scientists rarely read. Karen Shashok, a translator and editorial consultant in Spain, explains these phenomena in an excellent article, "Author's editors: facilitators of science information transfer" (5). Author's editors provide to a privileged few, just the kind of help AuthorAID seeks to offer.

She tells us the ways in which “author’s editors” aid their clients and facilitate the transfer of scientific-technical information: as members of writing teams; by advising on peer review, ethics, and publication processes; and by advocating for authors with journal editors. She alerts us to the heterogeneity of their preparation, professional roles and titles and why no standard model has emerged. We learn who employs them, who pays for their services, and where they work. Moreover, their contributions have rarely been acknowledged in print. Reference manuals often ignore their roles. This increases uncertainty about their own roles in transfer of scientific information. She bemoans this lack of a collective identity among those who contribute so much to improving the communication of science by working with authors.

Shashok’s analysis helped us understand the failure of editors and authors to coalesce in a natural community of interest, leaving many authors, particularly in developing countries, isolated from mentoring and editing support. Knowledge about the contributions of “author’s editors” is hidden from view, for reasons we are just coming to understand ourselves. This obscurity impedes expansion of editorial resources and hinders capacity development globally – especially in the developing world.

Author’s Editors in Resource-Rich Settings

We were slow to uncover reports about how authors in resource-rich settings depend upon editorial assistance prior to submission to journals. Shashok notes that despite trends toward greater transparency, authors have been reluctant “to advertise the fact that someone not listed as a co-author in the byline was involved in developing the final presentation of the information contained in the document” (6). This helps to explain why “...the role of authors’ editors has rarely been acknowledged in print” (7).

We discovered that in elite institutions, reliance upon author’s editors, in fact, abounds. Generous editor colleagues, who have offered to work with AuthorAID, also told us about the world of author’s editors. One well-financed hospital and research institution (M.D. Anderson Cancer Center at the University of Texas Medical Center) employs a team of 17 full-time scientific editors and eight support staff, within a Department of Scientific Publications, to edit

manuscripts and grant proposals and consult with authors. This editorial team offers intensive in-house scientific writing and publishing courses for trainees and junior faculty – native English speakers and those for whom English is not a first language. Colleagues at Harvard Medical School, who also expressed eagerness to help AuthorAID, are based in a program at Brigham and Women's Hospital, where editors assist faculty to prepare their manuscripts for submission. Their experience suggests that such assistance increases the likelihood of acceptance by the journals of choice.

Where no in-house editorial service exists, elite institutions often purchase editorial assistance for their scientists from freelance editors or those working in specialized firms. Reliance on these services reflects a response to the competitive culture of modern science, and to a change in the world of publishing. The venerable tradition of intensive editing within many scholarly journals and publishing houses has given way to commercial imperatives to turn out at lower cost more “content” that can also be licensed to others. Everywhere greater editorial responsibility has been pushed upon authors. Journals proliferate, but editorial resources within are often strained, leading to a tendency to accept papers that require less work or to publish ones that impose an additional burden on the reader. Among electronic journals, some invest not at all in editorial improvement of what they post, so long as peer reviewers approve the science. The standard business model for open access publishing, where the author pays, contributes little revenue to invest in editing.

Authors in institutions that provide editorial services, or who can afford to purchase them independently, possess a competitive advantage. Editorial assistance to authors would also help journal editors, especially for smaller journals, and those in settings where resources are thin (most dramatically, in Africa). Beyond a competitive advantage in manuscript acceptance, the learning associated with working with a rigorous mentor or team has value. To clarify expression of one's own ideas and findings is the very best of educational experiences. Thus, the availability of professional editorial assistance to authors in elite scientific institutions has been an additional, though largely unrecognized way, in which the playing field for authors is decidedly not level.

Related Programs to Improve Communication of Science

Perhaps the biggest problem the developing world faces is to improve the research undertaken in developing countries. That said, there is a great deal of fine research in developing countries that is never communicated to those who could use it. Many programs have begun to tackle parts of this communication issue – to assist developing world researchers and science institutions, including journals. Yet none has conceptualized or directly targeted the same problem that we describe here. It is worth understanding where AuthorAID fits.

- Leading health and science journals have attempted to increase coverage of developing world health problems and research, relying on theme issues, special sections or series, and by supporting SciDev.Net (8).
- The INASP (9), Health InterNetwork Access to Research Initiative (HINARI) (10), and other programs disseminate scientific journals free or at reduced cost, as a way to improve population health and enhance research and research environments in developing countries.
- Newer initiatives are starting to support developing world journals and their editors, notably through the Forum of African Medical Editors.
- Workshops on scientific writing (sometimes called “writeshops”) are increasingly available through scientific networks, medical schools and elsewhere. These go part of the way toward addressing the scarcity of editorial resources. Yet, authors and workshop sponsors tell us that engagement in these tends to be brief, rather than offering extended support based on working relationships between authors and mentors as envisioned in AuthorAID. (For example, research programs located at WHO, the African Midwives Research Network (AMRN) in Sub Sahara Africa, the Canadian International Development Research Council (IDRC), medical schools in Eastern Europe and elsewhere are teaching scientific writing in courses or workshops.)

We would like to thank David Dickson’s SciDev.Net team for the phrase “The Publishing Gap Between Rich and Poor” with which they titled our opinion piece that appeared on SciDev.net <<http://www.scidev.net/content/opinions/eng/cbsing-the-publishing-gap-between-rich-and-poor.cfm>>

AuthorAID's Special Role

Based on these observations, we began to ask: Can AuthorAID provide intensive service to some, and become the focal point of a new community of interest to serve many? Can it attract authors, editors, mentors, publishers and others to share resources and exchange experience and build capacity? And will authors and journals increase dissemination of useful contributions to knowledge for addressing poverty, health, and development? That this community is not yet formed, represents a challenge, and an advantage. AuthorAID, as a web-based programmatic prototype for matching authors to senior scientist mentors and professional editors, and as a dynamic point of connection, is, as we are discovering to our delight, attracting just the sort of attention and people who could create such an online community. There is a growing consensus that AuthorAID represents something different.

REFERENCES

1. Paraje G, Sadana R, Karam G. Increasing international gaps in health-related publications. *Science*. 2005;308:959-60, p. 959.
2. <http://www.globalissues.org/TradeRelated/Debt/USAid.asp#Agenda21RichNationsAgreedattheUnitedNationstoo7%ofGNPToAid> (accessed 15 August 2005).
3. <http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20031101facomment82602/> (accessed 15 August 2005) carol-c-adelman/the-privatization-of-foreign-aid-reassessing-national-largesse.html.
4. Certain E. Recherche Medicale en Afrique Francophone: Une recherche meconnue. *Medicine Tropicale*. 2003;63(6):627-31.
5. Shashok K. Author's editors: facilitators of science information transfer. *Learned Publishing*. 2001;14(2):113-21.
6. Shashok K. Author's editors: facilitators of science information transfer. *Learned Publishing*. 2001;14(2):113-21, p. 113.
7. Shashok K. Author's editors: facilitators of science information transfer. *Learned Publishing*. 2001;14(2):113-21, p. 119.
8. Science and Development Network. www.scidev.net (accessed 15 March 2006).
9. International Network for Access to Scientific Publications. www.inasp.info (accessed 15 March 2006).
10. Health InterNetwork Access to Research Initiative. www.healthinternetwork.net (accessed 15 March 2006).