Peer Review in Pakistan

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A few years ago, when the Pakistan Journal of Library and Information Science (PJLIS), the Editor (and also my colleague) Dr. Kanwal Ameen kindly invited me to join the Editorial Board. Without any hesitation I accepted this privilege. Some colleagues queried this decision, suggesting that I already had enough to occupy my time, indeed more than enough.

The reasons were, and are, quite simple, both from personal and professional perspectives. On a personal level, I have devoted most of my career to serving colleagues and institutions in developing countries. I was raised and educated partly in developing countries; it was a family tradition to serve in such nations, and my University of London professional qualifications had a developing country focus. My one and only professional work experience before turning to academia was in a development research centre in the UK.

On a professional level, I remain committed to the concept that robust information infrastructures in every country are a principal key to effective and lasting development. In relation to developing countries I have written on this many times, have led information-related workshops in many Asian countries, have taught in developing countries. And now, at this point on my career, and as a long-time journal editor, I can pause to reflect on some of the problems, some of the gaps in developing country information infrastructures that remain unresolved and not yet bridged.

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One of these areas is the creation and dissemination of local research and scholarly endeavour. Scholars and researchers with a developing country, information-related focus in their work time and again bemoan the fact that we do not know enough about what is happening in Pakistan, China, Vietnam, Iran, Laos, Malaysia - the list goes on, as any web search for scholarship from such countries quickly reveals. I have current PhD students who are investigating a host of reasons for this situation: scholars in their home countries do not know how to go about disseminating results of their work; when they do try to join the global research community by seeking publication in Western outlets for their work, they are usually rejected and so retreat into their comfort zones; researchers in these countries often remain suspicious of technologically-driven attempts, such as Open Access, which would put their work on the world stage, and anyway they lack the technical knowledge, technical resources, recourse to funds and local support to join these moves to improve dissemination of research and scholarship.

There are two principal factors at work here. One is the ready availability of Web-based avenues for bypassing the traditional peer-review process, and many avail themselves of this new approach to research dissemination. Some are 'radicals' seeking simply to break down traditional structures and rather outlandishly claiming that the web allows 'democracy' to rule in publishing. Others are more senior members of the various disciplines who already have all-but-unassailable reputations and bank on this when placing their work directly in the public domain. And still others may be in situations where local publishing does not exist to any degree, so, in a small number of instances, they may be able to place their work online - but without the benefit of critique or peer review. Thus a means of rapid and uncontrolled uploading of papers on the Web is one factor at work.

A second factor is the significant increase in high quality submissions to traditional print and electronic journals with rigorous peer-review processes in place. Four years ago a journal which I edit was receiving 50 per cent of the submissions it now receives, and it now publishes twice the number of papers per

year (with a submission rejection rate of more than 50%) than it did four years ago; other journals will have even more staggering figures to report. Publishers and editors simply cannot mange this outburst of submissions efficiently or economically, which means that it is taking longer for submissions to see the light of day, despite all the IT enhancements at our fingertips.

Thus as alternative avenues open up, as quality peer-reviewed journals struggle to keep up and face increasing backlogs, there is a growing tension between the needs of clients and what can realistically be done to service those needs. The Web is an obvious means of releasing this tension, but it serves the needs of only some – those indicated in the above paragraphs. For the rank and file among researchers and academics, those who are neither senior and well-known names nor radicals who see their role as breaking down structures simple because they exist, peer review remains an established, recognised means of securing the kudos of their peers. The problem remains, however, that these rank-and-file researchers in developing countries continue to be shut out of the publishing loop for many reasons, again as noted above. The queues are too long, they are squeezed to the back, they lack IT infrastructures or expertise to avail themselves of alternative means of dissemination, and anyway they rely more than many on established peer review mechanisms.

But there are signs of hope. As peer review struggles under the growing weight of submissions, as Open Access becomes the cri de guerre of some in the academic world, there remains a clear and present need for quality peer-reviewed outlets in developing countries which specialise in publishing papers of their resident researchers and scholars. There are many such examples, and the number is growing - Sri Lanka, India, China, and of course Pakistan, can now claim such initiatives, with varying degrees of success.

An excellent example is the very journal for which this is written – the Pakistan Journal of Library and Information Science. Since its inception this journal has struggled to set high standards,

to enforce quality peer review for library and information management papers within Pakistan (and elsewhere as it happens). Dr Ameen has mothered this child through it babyhood, and the Journal is now emerging into robust youth under her diligent eye. The result is a journal with a growing reputation in the South Asian region for publishing good quality papers that help the rest of the world understand what progress is being made in this region and this country.

The smallness of our library and information management world is more than evident in this issue of PJLIS; as I look at the authorship of these six papers, I recognise many as colleagues I have known for many years: Professor Anwar, Professor Mahmood, Professor Satija, Professor Rehman. It is thus a particular pleasure to introduce this issue of PJLIS, and to send fraternal best wishes to my colleagues.

The range of papers in this issue is broad, and offers a range of insights into developments within Pakistan. Thus Professor Anwar addresses the years leading up to the foundation of the Pakistan Library Association, and its struggle to survive and thrive - a strong professional association in any country is a sign of the strength of that profession, and this is a cornerstone of IFLA's work in many countries around the world.

Professor Satija, in his paper, tackles a subject of immediate global interest: the Sears List of Subject Headings (19th ed.), and its importance in providing access to information in whatever country one may be domiciled. Professor Satija's view that 'research, special and large libraries may not find it adequate or detailed enough for subject cataloguing their collections' will set some on edge, but this will encourage needed debate within the profession. Professor Mahmood and his colleagues look at an issue of global interest - Internet use and literacy among tertiary students, here adding to our knowledge with a case study from Pakistan. Professor Rehman continues his longstanding research in LIS education and professional competencies with a geographically neutral analysis of the need for new competencies, benchmarked internationally, that will lead informational

professionals into the digital future far better prepared than in the past. This resonates with my own recent experience on the LIANZA Registration Board, which has developed a set of core competencies for library and information professionals, and the education providers, in New Zealand.

The final pair of papers looks at technologies and their impacts on the information professions. The first of the pair, on ICT media tools employed in Tamil Nadu, India includes the apposite statement, 'developing countries are being encouraged to invest in their national information infrastructure so that they can participate in knowledge-based development'. Indeed, but how much training is being provided, and how much is needed? If India is like other developing countries in Asia, digital literacy remains a major hurdle among information professionals. And in the last paper the team of authors investigates the value and usefulness of institutional repositories for digitised resources, suggesting that both archival and access requirements are met in such repositories.

In this issue of the "Pakistan Journal of Library and Information Science" we thus have ample evidence that peer review is indeed alive and well in Pakistan, resulting in an issue that contains some insightful and contextually significant work for information professionals in both Pakistan and the wider region. I commend the Editor for her continuing leadership, and the contributors not only for their scholarship but also for helping to continue the development of this journal.