

Charlotte Roh

# Library publishing and diversity values

## Changing scholarly publishing through policy and scholarly communication education

In 2014, students at over 75 higher education institutions demanded “an end to systemic and structural racism on campus.”<sup>1</sup> The most common demand among student protesters was an increase in faculty diversity;<sup>2</sup> faculty of color, according to a U.S. Department of Education 2015 report, make up only 16% of full professors.<sup>3</sup>

This lack of diversity persists in librarianship and publishing, as well. ALA’s 2014 demographics update reports the association’s membership is 87.1% white,<sup>4</sup> and the annual 2015 *Publishers Weekly* survey reports that publishers are 89% white/Caucasian.<sup>5</sup>

At the 2015 Society for Scholarly Publishing meeting, Alice Meadows commented, “There’s a problem with racial diversity overall in terms of representation. There’s a teeny tiny number of ethnic minorities working in scholarly publishing, it’s terrible.”<sup>6</sup>

What are the consequences of this lack of diversity in publishing, librarianship, and faculty? We know already that privilege can bias access to material, which is part of why the open access movement exists, to alleviate the barriers that cost can create for researchers. However, one possible consequence is a feedback loop in scholarship that privileges and publishes the majority voice, which is often white and male.

For example, in 2013, two published studies addressed the overrepresentation of men in scholarly publications. The first

study examined 5.4 million peer-reviewed, scientific articles between 2008 and 2012, and found that 70% of the authors were men.<sup>7</sup> In the second study, researchers reviewed 8 million papers from JSTOR—across the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities—and found that only 27.2% of authors were women.<sup>8</sup>

There is also evidence that privilege creates bias in the content itself. In 2009 the World Bank Development Research Group Poverty and Inequality Team reviewed 76,046 empirical economics papers and found that papers written about the United States were more likely to be published in the top five economics journals. Only 1.5% were about countries other than the United States, and scholars interested in low-income countries reported changing their research to focus on the United States in order to be accepted for publication.<sup>9</sup>

It is clear that when scholarly publishing fails to reflect the diversity of authors, readers, and research questions, it presents

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real problems for 1) the authors who are not being published and therefore do not achieve tenure and promotion, and 2) the researchers who do not have access to the full range of possible scholarship. Homogeneity at the top means editors and publishers too often produce homogenous literature. While blind peer review is a valuable tool, “even if a publication is making every effort to metaphorically audition orchestra members behind an opaque screen, it is not helpful if the editors and publishers who are handling the paperwork, assigning reviewers, determining schedules, recruiting editorial boards, and ultimately making policy and article level decisions are not in fact representative or even cognizant of injustices they perpetuate as biased people in a biased system.”<sup>10</sup>

Fortunately, the open access movement has coincided with the development of alternative scholarly communication platforms, and there are now opportunities for libraries and library partners (such as Knowledge Unlatched, Open Library of the Humanities, and Luminos) to push back against these biased systems and support publications that might not otherwise have a voice.

For example, at the University of Iowa, the *Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis* was launched by graduate students as an act of scholarship and activism, to feature the works of diverse scholars, practitioners, and activists who felt that they otherwise did not have a voice. At the University of Massachusetts-Amherst (UMass Amherst), the journal *Landscapes of Violence* is an inclusive platform that purposefully addresses inequality, marginalization, and injustice.

The editorial staff of both publications are graduate students who are keenly aware of not only the inequalities in publishing for and by marginalized voices, but also of the economic disparities in access caused by commercial publishing. These concerns led them to open access platforms offered by academic libraries. Library publishing allows new voices to find their way into disciplinary conversations, reach new audiences, both academic and public, and impact existing

and emerging fields of scholarship and practice in a transformative way. Through library publishing, librarians are positioned to work closely with researchers, including students, to make a revolutionary contribution to scholarship, both in the diversity of voices that are published and in the forms of knowledge that enter academic discourse.

Librarians who are committed to open access publishing can follow the lead of Martin Paul Eve, codirector of the Open Library of the Humanities, who has made clear that “diversity of participation is important to our platform . . . we will actively monitor and release reports on demographics across our platform (particularly with respect to editors), taking measures, where necessary, to remove barriers to participation and to ensure breadth of representation.”<sup>11</sup>

Library publishers who feel some hesitancy about asking their journals to consider the demographics of their contributors and editorial boards can start with institutional and library stated values. For example, the UMass Amherst homepage leads clearly to a “Diversity Matters” website with a diversity statement and diversity strategic plan, which is a helpful touchstone in discussions with scholars who might value diversity and inclusion but might not have previously considered its importance in publishing.

To show what it looks like to put these values in practice, library publishers can point to an example within librarianship. In 2014, *Code4Lib Journal* reviewed its publications and concluded that the majority of its articles were written by men. Ron Peterson, the editor-in-chief, noted, “Women make up less than 40% of the authors published in the *Journal*. We should be able to find more female authors in a profession that is 80% women.” Also striking was the makeup of the Editorial Committee: out of the 29 people who had been on the Editorial Committee, only eight were women.<sup>12</sup>

While these numbers might not be consistent across library publications, the current *Code4Lib Journal* editorial board has four women and eight men, already a marked

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improvement in one year, and a positive example of how a journal can turn a lens on its own structural inequalities to effect positive change. Library publishers, through frank conversation with their journal editors, can enable scholars to consider mindfully whether the demographics of editors, editorial boards, and reviewers align with desired diversity values, and to put policies and practical tools in place to support those goals.

In addition to hosting publications, libraries are engaged in services around publishing, such as copyright education, author rights consultation, and scholarly communication and information literacy.<sup>13</sup> These newly evolving roles can be an opportunity to address diversity representation and biases in scholarship as an aspect of information literacy at the intersection of scholarly communication.

The ACRL white paper on scholarly communication and information literacy notes, “The challenges teaching librarians face now go far beyond bibliographic and textual information . . . [and] requires librarians to impart a deeper knowledge of the life cycle of scholarship, the environment in which it is created, the social life of information, and an understanding of the inequities in access to both the information and to the tools necessary to use that information.”<sup>14</sup>

For example, as part of information literacy, librarians already teach students how to evaluate whether an article is a peer-reviewed resource, and what the role

of peer review is in the life cycle of scholarship. A scholarly communication education approach can and should also include discussion of the environment in which scholarship is created and published—the economic realities that led to the open access movement and the biases of diversity and representation in scholarly communication.

As a guest speaker for Simmons College School of Library and Information Science, I have taught specifically on the inequalities in scholarship and how academic librarians are addressing these inequalities regardless of our specialized roles, whether as scholarly communication librarians, catalogers, acquisitions librarians, or collection development librarians.<sup>15</sup>

At UMass Amherst, the Scholarly Communication Department partnered with the Office of the Graduate School and the Graduate Students of Color Association to hold a brown bag on publishing directed at early-career scholars from underrepresented groups. The event demystified the process of publishing, which is crucial in part because of the dearth of mentors for scholars of color.

The session described the importance of publishing in a tenure-track academic career, how to think strategically about publishing in the context of a specific field of study (for example, some disciplines value articles and some value monographs), the steps in the peer review process, and how to submit an article or book proposal. The session also made explicit the inherent biases in publishing, as described earlier in this article, and encouraged the graduate authors to think of themselves not only as authors, but also as future reviewers and future editorial board members who could work toward representation and equity in publishing.

Many academic libraries have responded positively and proactively to student demands to support diversity by hosting events, producing research guides, and collaborating with educators. Librarians involved in scholarly communication advocacy and information literacy can also

support diversity by working to address the inequities in diversity and representation in scholarly publishing. Advocacy and education is important, not just for authors who are unrepresented due to biases in the publishing system, but also for researchers who need access to marginalized scholarly content, and students who don't see themselves reflected in academia.

As librarians who are engaging more directly with scholarly publishing, we must ask ourselves: Are we perpetuating the biases and power structures of traditional scholarly publishing? Or are we using library publishing to interrogate, educate, and establish more equitable models of scholarly communication? As librarians, we can be explicit about inequalities in scholarly publishing. We can take action to avoid reproducing them in our unique roles as publishers, scholarly communication experts, and information literacy providers.

## Notes

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