

Authors and Editors of Library Science Journals: Reflections from an Asia/Pacific Context

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LIS journals fulfil a role as communicators of scholarship and research. To do this effectively they must contain papers that meet international standards, but not necessarily at the expense of possibly unique local considerations. This paper

reviews the purposes and standards of LIS journals from an editor's perspective and then looks at the evaluation process for an anglophone journal in which most of the contributors and readers are from Asia.

Introduction

Scholars and researchers engage in scholarship and research for a variety of reasons: because they enjoy the detective work it involves, because they are interested in ideas, because they are seeking tenure or promotion. Not often, though, do they undertake these activities for the pure pleasure of writing and being published. In fact most competent researchers feel quite diffident about their written communication skills, and as a journal editor I am inclined to accept their diffidence as well founded. We who edit journals live with this reality, that many of our contributors are not skilled communicators. When we work with an anglophone LIS journal whose contributor base uses English as a second or third language, then the problem is compounded.

The purpose of scholarly writing

This discussion reviews why individuals write for LIS journals, what they expect in the process, what editors ought to be achieving – all from the

perspective of an editor based in the Asia/Pacific region.

Scholarly or research writing has a number of aims, and this may be one of the reasons that journal contributors find the writing process difficult to sustain. 'Ordinary' writing, say of a piece of fiction, is done to entertain and to tell a story; scholars and researchers, on the other hand, write principally to inform and educate. Such writing, if done well, achieves a number of aims:

- it permits the writer to present new ideas or knowledge to colleagues
- it convinces other scholars/researchers that it is scholarship/research worth consideration in terms of its methodology, analysis and outcomes
- it enables the writer to make sense of what he has discovered, and to place it in the context of a wider body of knowledge.

Achieving these aims comes only with practice, and for the most part it is only the more experienced writer who can juggle them competently. For the individual new to scholarly writing, the process tends to be done from a personal per-

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spective and has an author-oriented approach. The scholar/researcher may understand very clearly what an investigation has found and may feel it is all too obvious to warrant explanation in full. Accordingly, the writing may contain a number of unstated assumptions or may reflect the writer's own thought processes – the reader, in other words, is not a prime consideration. Consequently, the text may neither read well nor follow a recognised organisational style. With experience comes the recognition that writing needs to be reader-oriented in order to achieve clarity and to have an impact.

Writing for readers

Writing with a successful reader orientation seems to embody certain key characteristics. In fact across the spectrum of social and human sciences there appear to be three standard conventions that experienced writers follow to ensure wide acceptance of their scholarship:

- prose should be impersonal and avoid *ad hominem* arguments
- text should be straightforward and conventional in terms of structure, vocabulary and organisation
- the writing should follow a commonly accepted, logical framework such as: introduction, methodology, results, discussion, and conclusions.

Impersonal, conventional and logically organised writing may not be exciting, and it may be difficult to achieve, yet it is the best way to communicate effectively, especially for an audience unfamiliar with the subtler nuances of the English language.

Evolving trends in presentation

Aside from this matter of fitting the writing to the purpose of scholarly communication it is important that scholars and researchers recognise and take advantage of emerging trends in the presentation of articles

Titles and abstracts

For purposes of information retrieval certain parts of articles have gained greater importance in recent years, yet most often require revision in

papers submitted by writers in Asia. Here we refer to titles and abstracts.

In terms of retrieval the most useful component of a journal article is its title. In library science literature the title has become very specific and detailed, using focused rather than generic terms. Such titles are far more informative and content-focused than in the past as a means of indicating article content unambiguously.

Almost as important are abstracts, which allow for the fuller description of an article's content than the title; but for some reason very few writers are able to present a good abstract. The norm for writers in Asia is to provide no abstract at all, even when a journal, such as *Asian Libraries*, requires this as part of the original submission. At the other extreme are those American journals in which the abstract is a mini-discourse, telling us far more than we need to know. In our experience all but the most complex papers can be adequately treated in an abstract of approximately 100 words, rarely more.

Discussion and presentation

Within the body of a scholarly article subtle changes are occurring in three respects – the introduction, the methodological discussion, graphs and tables.

The introductory part of an article should be more than a basic introduction to the topic. In effect it should offer a clear road map of where the paper is going, how it is getting there, and what it will show once one arrives. In this it is a step up the ladder from the abstract, offering more detail and in particular guidance on what one can expect in the ensuing discussion. In many journals the introductory discussions in papers are much improved in recent years, due to, one suspects, gentle editorial imposition. In my view, an introduction needs to be treated as a serious matter, and not just as a 'warming-up' exercise for the writer. If the introduction is well crafted, a reader will be drawn in and will feel more comfortable with the discussion that follows.

There is some tendency in the social sciences for methodology to be treated with less importance than in the past, a trend that is not recommended in LIS. Because we utilise such a range of methods in our discipline, from mathematical formulae to case studies to anthropological eth-

nographies, the methodology section remains a key to a paper's validity and reliability and therefore cannot be devalued.

Another emerging trend is for increasingly sophisticated graphic and tabular displays, often as a substitute for text. A table is intended to present very precise detail on the results of research; a graph or similar device is intended to express relationships between variables or to display trends in specific factors. However, neither table nor graph should be displayed without full discussion of content and meaning. That is, tabular and graphic data are not a substitute for analysis, but rather complementary means of presentation. Just because computer software allows us to present vivid displays does not mean that we can allow the machine to do our analytical or narrative work for us. Many times referees reject papers that look impressive but contain little meaningful discussion. Analysis, critical engagement with ideas, and clear development of arguments – these cannot be replaced by any visual display.

Multiple authorship

Many years ago it was uncommon to see a paper in LIS attributed to more than one author; today it is increasingly uncommon to see a paper by a single author, and joint authorship is becoming normative in some fields within library science. This may be a result of many factors – as busy people, we find it less burdensome to have co-authors; much research is complex, requiring joint researchers and therefore joint authors; collegiality and internationalism in LIS have improved substantially of late, etc.

But who actually 'makes it' as an author is cause for increasing concern. Take for example, the report by a colleague at an Asian university that the head of his department was insisting that any work by a research student submitted for publication had to include the head's name as a co-author, on the grounds that the work was being conducted in his department. Is this ethical? Probably not. Is it professional? Certainly not.

There are other instances of supervisors asking that their names appear on work done by their research students, of a person responsible for securing research funds being included as a co-author, etc. At the other extreme is work done by a team, or substantially by one or more research

assistants and then being attributed to 'the professor' alone. This is a pattern that seems to be common in a number of Asian countries, with research assistants and junior academics simply not counting in terms of authorship despite their contribution, which may have been substantial. Who is included, who is excluded – these are not difficult issues if people behave in a professional and ethical manner.

Also problematic is the order of names. The old method of listing contributors in alphabetical order is waning, and the matter of who comes first has assumed almost heroic proportions in some situations. For example, a recent project came to the point of cancellation because one of the authors in a four-author book insisted on being named first on the basis of amount of work done, while another insisted on being named first on the basis of academic seniority. Only when the publisher threatened cancellation of the project did the authors resolve the matter. There is no easy solution to this type of problem, because authors correctly recognise that a work by more than two individuals will not be cited by other than the first-named ('Clayton and Gorman' is fine, but 'Clayton, Gorman and Pors' will only be known as 'Clayton').

The retrieval apparatus for an article, the amount of detail in some parts of the text, the use of graphic displays in place of text, the increase in multiple authorship all pose problems as they evolve, and they are points to be considered not only by authors but also by editors and referees.

Editors and referees

One role of a scholarly or professional journal in LIS is to indicate the acceptability of a piece of work by publishing it. This means that a particular paper has been accepted by the professional or scholarly community that the journal represents. For this acceptance to occur all submissions must be evaluated and approved – in other words, there must be some form of quality control. It is this norm of quality control that seems most to incense cybernauts and Internet junkies, who maintain that the great benefit of the Internet is its total democracy, allowing anyone anywhere to 'publish' anything. But some readers prefer not to waste valuable time on sub-standard work; rather, they want to rely on dependable publish-

ers to do the evaluative work before publication, to publish work with a recognised imprimatur.

The emphasis on quality control in an era of burgeoning journal literature and greater specialisation has led to increased reliance on peer review in the West. But this appears not to be the norm in Asian LIS journals. With respect, until a system of peer review is in place and operating rigorously and objectively, no journal can enjoy international standing.

The editor

Journal editors and editorial boards (or peer reviewers or referees) exercise quality control on behalf of the scholarly community. The editor is the principal gatekeeper, the one who makes an initial decision about an article, who accepts or rejects. Sometimes the editor alone makes the final decision, but increasingly the editor then confirms his judgement by sending an article that has passed his initial test to one or more referees who may be more expert in the specific topic of the submission. Such refereeing must be 'blind'; that is, the referee must not know the identity of the author or the author's institutional affiliation – another feature that some journals overlook, making their refereeing process somewhat suspect in terms of bias.

The referee

What characterises a superior referee in a journal based in the Asia/Pacific region? 'Based in the Asia/Pacific region' is a key phrase, because there are cultural differences that need to be overcome if these journals are to meet international evaluative standards. There are three qualities that one should expect of a referee:

- competent researcher
- objective assessor
- comparative evaluator

A referee should be a competent researcher who is *au fait* with trends and developments in his field. This is easier said than achieved in many Asian countries. For example, how many researchers are there competent in English and with access to the latest LIS literature in Myanmar or Vietnam or Bangladesh?

A referee should be able to make a fair and objective assessment of the methodology employed. This is also easier said than achieved because of the growing divide between quantitative and qualitative research, and the growing volume of the latter. Few Asian-based researchers or academics in LIS have the expertise to make fair judgements of ethnographic research, and one looks to the next generation of Asian LIS researchers to fill this void.

A referee should be able to determine whether a paper is going to give 'value for space' in view of the growing competition for space in most journals. In the case of *Asian Libraries*, for instance, the number of submissions has grown 300 per cent in 12 months, yet we are still able to publish only 24 substantive papers (refereed and professional) in a given year.

Referees in Asia, especially those not trained outside Asia, sometimes find it difficult to make these determinations for a host of reasons. In the first place, many have not been trained in the critical reading of published literature. In the second place, many take a less negative view of papers which do not meet the accepted canons of scholarly writing in the West – not a bad thing, incidentally, if this encourages us to take a culturally sensitive view of academic writing (without at the same time sacrificing standards of excellence). Third, Asian scholars are not much given to criticism that smacks of the personal, as this is likely to cause loss of face for the recipient – and may well result in 'payback' at some future date. This, frankly, is behind much of the diffidence one finds among Asian colleagues – but it is still refreshing to be in an atmosphere where criticism and negativity are not the order of the day, and in this regard we in the West have much to learn.

Criteria for assessment

What editors and referees do in assessing submissions should be clearly delineated, with the parameters spelled out in no uncertain terms. This means that all involved in the process must have a precise understanding of our assessment criteria.

There is in fact growing concern about suitable assessment criteria for writing by LIS scholars and professionals from different academic back-

grounds and with different language skills. One school of thought says the criteria should be international and take no account of national or cultural differences. Another body of opinion suggests that there be different criteria for different groups, for different types of research, for different nationalities. This latter approach frankly leads to confusion and a dilution of the effectiveness of the refereeing process – there are no recognised standards but rather a series of unique sets of standards.

On the other hand it is markedly unfair to state that a person writing in a foreign language and in a mode for which he was not necessarily trained should be expected to meet the same level of standards as those writing in their native tongue and with the requisite training. It seems more appropriate to use common assessment criteria but perhaps to set the benchmark at a different level, and then gradually raise the level as the contributors become more expert through experience and education.

Journal editors have discussed the matter of referee assessment for a long time, and there has been some interesting research in this area. Lindsey, for example, asked social science referees what they felt were important criteria in submissions and found that 12 criteria mattered, although some with relatively low mean scores. (Lindsey 1978) These criteria are listed in Table 1 in descending order of mean score; it should be recognised that these criteria were suggested by referees of journals in developed Western countries, and they are not necessarily relevant or appropriate for other regions.

Table 1. Importance of Assessment Criteria (Lindsey)

Criterion	Mean score
Value of the findings for advancing the field	5.8
Acceptability of the research design	5.6
Theoretical relevance of the work	5.4
Level of scholarship demonstrated	5.4
Presence of creative ideas	5.2
New empirical evidence	5.0
Sophistication of methodology and analysis	4.3
Relevance of the article to the journal's focus	4.3
Display of ethical sensitivity	4.1
Value of findings for everyday life	2.9
Entertainment value	1.5
Background and reputation of the author	1.3

Table 2. Key Criteria for Assessing Submissions to Asian LIS Journals

- Advancement of knowledge
- New information or data
- Theoretical soundness
- Level of scholarship
- Acceptable research design
- Appropriate methodology and analysis

Frankly, these criteria are too extensive for a journal in Asia: some items are not relevant, others are simply unimportant. If relevance of a submission to the journal's focus is accepted as a given, then there are six criteria that might be viewed as essential in determining the suitability of a submission for publication in an anglophone Asia/Pacific LIS journal. These are listed in descending order of importance in Table 2.

Why are these the key criteria, and why in this particular order? When dealing with regions or countries about which little is known elsewhere, advancement of knowledge is the key criterion, followed closely by the presence of new data – one more apparent in scholarly writing, the other more evident in research-based writing. Consider, in anglophone countries, how much or how little is known about the information professions in China, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Vietnam, Thailand, Japan, Korea – the list is depressingly long. For this reason an anglophone Asian journal has a particular mission to publish new knowledge, new information.

Theoretical soundness and level of scholarship are also placed well up the scale, for writing internationally must be scholarly and well grounded in theory. In submissions by authors based in Asia, theory and level of scholarship are sometimes difficult to ascertain, but writers must be encouraged to follow high standards in both respects. Research design, methodology and data analysis are the final criteria, and it is here that many Asian authors seem to be gaining ground most quickly, as they become more aware of research standards and conventions in the West. But for others these criteria remain elusive, and again editors, referees and publishers have an educational role to perform in teaching writers these skills.

These six points are important because they enable one to answer three questions that are put to referees:

- Is the submission a significant contribution in terms of the knowledge or information conveyed?
- Is the submission an original contribution?
- Is the submission sound in terms of methodology, findings and structure?

If all or most of these questions can be answered affirmatively, then we have a paper that may warrant publication. Once acceptable international standards have been achieved in these areas, attention might turn to the less significant criteria of ethical sensitivity, creativity, author background, etc.

Refereed Articles and Professional Papers

Unfortunately, a certain amount of writing by Asian experts simply does not make the grade if the above criteria are accepted as reasonable conventions. This may seem a harsh statement, and it does open one to the charge of cultural elitism or imperialism (depending on where one sits on the Liberal → Marxist continuum). However, it is based on some years of personal experience as an editor, as a writer and as a resident of the Asia-Pacific region.

Based on this personal experience, it appears that submissions to Asian journals exhibit weaknesses in two major respects: (1) theoretical constructs and research design, and (2) structure and writing style. Most worrying are papers falling within the first group. Theory and methodology seem to be sources of weakness in many of the social sciences (Daft 1995), and there is not much that an editor can do to change this, except make constructive suggestions for improvements.

One solution has been to adopt a system of differentiating between submissions of varying characteristics. A poor article is still a poor article and ought to be rejected as such – as the quality of writing improves in the region, so standards

will be raised. In two years, with one particular Asian journal, this in fact has occurred, with the result that increasing numbers of papers are being rejected outright. However, it is also possible to recognise that a paper submitted as a research article might not make the grade as research but may still be worthwhile in terms of its information content. Therefore, it is worth distinguishing between *refereed articles* (published with a tag indicating that they are in fact refereed), which are principally research-based scholarly pieces, and *professional papers*, which are largely of informational value and describe developments, situations, activities in a place, region or professional sector. In this way one might be able to publish valuable information, often from countries about which little is known in the anglophone professional world (e.g., Vietnam, China, Indonesia).

Conclusion

If LIS journals in Asia and the Pacific are to be valuable vehicles for communicating the results of scholarship and research, then they must increasingly adhere to internationally accepted standards of excellence. However, this should not be entirely at the expense of unique local considerations. In this paper suggestions have been made as to how there can be an appropriate blend of international standards with local realities. By adopting this position it is possible for a journal in the Asia/Pacific region to help authors achieve wider recognition and also to learn how to present themselves in international forums where conventions may differ from their locally learned practices.

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