

KNOWLEDGE EXPLOSION, KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION AND PEER REVIEW. TRENDS IN SOME SOCIAL SCIENCE LOCATIONS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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Abstract

This paper examines knowledge explosion, knowledge production and peer review trends in some social science locations. The research design is exploratory. It is held in the work that knowledge explosion in some paradoxical trajectories possesses integral challenges. Some of these intrinsic questions of knowledge explosion border on evolutionary tendencies in knowledge production. The next research variable inherent in the knowledge production component of the work is peer review. The paper consequently identifies some untoward trends in social science peer review in the focus-locations. The trend-observations in the paper are not in any way exhaustive. The work thus proposes further research undertakings on the subject matter, in continuity of the embedded debates.

Keywords: *Knowledge explosion, Knowledge production, Peer review*

Introduction

Knowledge explosion in some ironical dimensions possesses inherent challenges. Relevant synonyms of knowledge in this context include awareness, understanding, expertise, education, learning and wisdom which are all positive phenomena. An upsurge in their availabilities should have connoted limitless opportunities but among the problematic of knowledge explosion must be counted the evolutionary tendencies in knowledge production. Research is an intrinsic praxis of knowledge production (Bell & Kennan, 2021; Chukwuere, 2021; Gustavsen, 2003; Hordijk & Baud, 2006). Then Olebara (2022, p.42) deposes that “research is the act of proffering solution(s) for present and future problems through knowledge contribution, knowledge seeking, and organization”. Research is universally conducted across geographical divides. Invariably, research of the academic trajectory finds expression and potency in publications. Research that is not published is analogous to a rush light that is not set alight. Publishing a research work of course is dependent on its being publishable. In an era of knowledge explosion therefore, knowing what is publishable is critical in knowledge production. Then integral to the publishing dimensions of knowledge production (at the academic arena) with specific reference to journal articles, book chapters, etcetera, is the factor of peer review.

According to BMC (2022, p.1) “peer review is the system used to assess the quality of a manuscript before it is published. Independent researchers in the relevant research area assess submitted manuscripts for originality, validity and significance, to help editors determine whether a manuscript should be published in their journal”. But it appears as if knowledge production in an era of knowledge explosion (particularly over the matter of peer review) is increasingly witnessing some strange trends in certain academic locations. Genelza (2022, p.1) thus exclaims that “change is all around us but the challenge is learning to deal with transformation (change) efficiently and successfully”. It needs to be underscored however that the element of peer review in knowledge production has universally attracted endless criticisms. It indisputably lacks standardized procedures. Parsi & Elster (2018, p.3) thus declares pertinently that “given the significance of peer review, the lack of standardized guidance on how to review, who should review, and the lack of evaluation of the process is remarkable”.

This contribution is an attempt to identify some of these unconstructive peer review tendencies. The focus of the paper is the social sciences, from where the participant observer inferences for the work are drawn. Furthermore, the paper is focused on the geographic location identified by Okeke & Iloh (2020) as the emerging world regions in social science scholarship. According to Okeke & Iloh (2020, p.15) “within the parameters of social science scholarship, when the West and the United States are excluded, what

remains come under the emerging world classification". The paper's methodology is purposively, critically normative. It is additionally exploratory.

Conceptual elucidations

Knowledge explosion

What exactly is knowledge explosion? It seems to be one of those concepts that researchers and sundry lay writers take their meanings for granted. Hence, knowledge explosion is usually used interchangeably but erroneously with information explosion. Truly, the commoner concept is information explosion which precisely refers to the express upsurge in the volume of published information or data and the consequences of this profusion (Hilbert, 2015). Still knowledge explosion retains immense validity as a social scientific concept and even in manifold other disciplines. Specifically in education, Jain (2022, p.1) identifies the following as "five main influences of knowledge explosion: brain and knowledge, information technology, computer-based teaching model, communication and education, and educational technology". Knowledge explosion and information explosion therefore possess remarkably divergent meanings. It has accordingly been suggested that "the term 'knowledge explosion' refers to the evolvment of such type of human societies where sufficient quantity of quality knowledge is accessible to the majority of humans" (Cloud, 2006, p1). Knowledge explosion is the antithesis of esotericism anywhere. It is synonymous with universal knowledge democratization (Villani et al, 2023).

Knowledge production

Devoid of tedious and complicated elaboration, knowledge production "refers to the cluster of related activities in a higher education institution, a research center or an enterprise that has to do with producing new knowledge" (IGI Global, 2022, p.1). In higher education institutions, the academic staff is usually expected to "publish or totally perish". At research centers or other knowledge production enterprises, the degree of going dead (perishing) may differ. At the university level for example, there are no excuses for refusing to publish. On the other hand, the knowledge production participant at the other research center may find some pretexts on which to hinge such apparent non-production. This other researcher may blame the research funder (probably government) his/her non-contribution. He or she may easily claim not to have been forthcoming in publishing because the research funder did not adequately provide for the research proper and the subsequent publication. In the case of academic (higher education) research therefore there may be desperation on the part of the academic to get published. Desperation begets desperation. The more academics get desperate to be published, the more the publishers get desperate to publish the academics (an allusion to predatory publishing). This breeds unusualness in the knowledge production cycle. It triggers precariousness in knowledge production (Reddy & Amer, 2023). The peer review mechanism was intended to contribute to the negation of such aberrations.

The concept of peer review

Here is actually another concept in the knowledge production chain that every stakeholder may claim to be conversant with its meaning. In such regards, it is probably easier to explain the sense of the concept than its practical bearing which entails some conceptual divergences. For instance, there is on the international front, the public policy or political economy connotation of peer review (the concept of peer review among states). Jongen (2018, 909) highlight that "peer reviews among states are the most commonly used monitoring instrument in the international anticorruption regime as pioneered by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in the 1990s". Jongen (2018, 909) elucidates that "today the Council of Europe, the United Nations (UN) and the Organization of American States use peer review to monitor compliance with their anticorruption conventions, as peer review is a system of reciprocal, intergovernmental evaluations in which states' policy performance is periodically assessed by experts from other states (the peers). These experts identify policy shortcomings, write a report, and make recommendations for improvement". So in this specific context, peer review is describable as a political economy tool.

Relatedly therefore, Tennant & Ross-Hellauer (2020, p.1) assert that "peer review is a ubiquitous element of scholarly research quality assurance and assessment. It forms a critical part of a research and development enterprise that annually invests \$2 trillion US dollars (USD) globally and produces more than 3 million peer reviewed research articles. As an institutional norm governing scientific legitimacy, it plays a

central role in defining the hierarchical structure of higher education and academia. Now, publication of peer-reviewed journal articles plays a pivotal role in research careers, conferring academic prestige and scholarly legitimacy upon research and individuals". Dealing specifically with Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) Ochsner et al (2020, p.1) declare that "peer review is an important method of research evaluation, and it seems that the only adequate way to evaluate SSH research involves some form of peer review". In the viewpoint of Ochsner et al. (2020, p.1) "even if bibliometrics and other quantitative ways of evaluation may provide information on some aspects of SSH research, like productivity and publication strategies of research units, metrics-based indicators should be used with caution in SSH. This is due to the low coverage of SSH fields in the standard publication databases and a mismatch between dimensions of quality as defined by peers and standard bibliometric indicators".

Adding to the explications, Derrick & Ross-Hellauer (2020, p.10) posit that "peer review, whether as a political tool or one to facilitate academic self-governance, is a powerful driver of knowledge production. As its primary role of ensuring the validity and quality of research, it has been used in a variety of settings including: pre-publication evaluation of scientific manuscripts; decision making of grant applications; the assessment of research departments (such as used in national audit exercises); reviews of research disciplines by funding councils; and as a method of international benchmarking". According to Derrick & Ross-Hellauer (2020, p.10) "in all these situations, the operationalization of peer review is different with group-peer review situations that rely on the benefits of open deliberation by a range of research and non-academic experts and scientific manuscript being a blinded process negotiated by one single actor, the editor".. Then "considering these differences, the researchers concentrated on peer review for scholarly manuscripts only and how its conceptualization and operationalization relates to SSH". Consequently, Derrick & Ross-Hellauer (2020, p.10) describes "peer review of scholarly manuscripts as the formal quality assurance mechanism whereby works are made subject to the scrutiny of others, whose feedback and judgments are then used to improve them and make final decisions regarding selection for publication".

Contributing to the explications, Jefferson et al. (2006, p. 3) submit that "learned societies and journal editors usually rely on the views of independent (outside) content experts in making decisions on publication of submitted manuscripts or presentation of reports at meetings and this system of appraisal is known as peer review". They highlight that this "use of peers to assess the work of fellow scientists goes back at least 200 years". From the background of industrial and organizational psychology Köhler et al. (2020, p.3) add that "Peer review is a critical component towards facilitating a robust science". These contributors further assert that "peer review exists beyond academic publishing in organizations, university departments, grant agencies, classrooms and many more work contexts and reviewers are responsible for judging the quality of research conducted and submitted for evaluation. Furthermore, they are responsible for treating authors and their work with respect, in a supportive and developmental manner".

Similarly, Elsevier (2022, p.1) posits that "reviewers play a pivotal role in scholarly publishing and the peer review system exists to validate academic work, helps to improve the quality of published research, and increases networking possibilities within research communities, furthermore that despite criticisms, peer review is still the only widely accepted method for research validation and has continued successfully with relatively minor changes for some 350 years". Given the central role of peer review in industrial and organizational psychology, it was strange to have an absence of standards or formalized review guidelines in the field and it was curious that the reviewers never received formal training in peer review. The researchers subsequently proposed a proficiency framework for peer reviewing. In the words of Köhler et al. (2020, p.3) "the purpose of the competency framework is to provide a definition of excellent peer reviewing and guidelines to reviewers for which types of behaviors will lead to good peer reviews". They further argue that:

By defining these competencies, we create clarity around expectations for peer review, standards for good peer reviews, and opportunities for training the behaviors required to deliver good peer reviews. We further discuss how the competency framework can be used to improve peer reviewing and suggest additional steps forward that involve suggestions for how stakeholders can get involved in fostering high-quality peer reviewing (Köhler et al., 2020, p.3).

Contributing to the conceptualizations, Kelly et al. (2014, p.227) highlight that "peer review has been defined as a process of subjecting an author's scholarly work, research or ideas to the scrutiny of others

who are experts in the same field. It functions to encourage authors to meet the accepted high standards of their discipline and to control the dissemination of research data to ensure that unwarranted claims, unacceptable interpretations or personal views are not published without prior expert review". Publishing Research Consortium (2016) in Elsevier (2022, p.1) showcases where "82 percent of researchers agreed that without peer review there is no control in scientific communication." In further elaboration, Kelly et al. (2014, p.228) submit that "peer review is intended to serve two primary purposes. Firstly, it acts as a filter to ensure that only high quality research is published, especially in reputable journals, by determining the validity, significance and originality of the study. Secondly, peer review is intended to improve the quality of manuscripts that are deemed suitable for publication". Consequently, "peer reviewers provide suggestions to authors on how to improve the quality of their manuscripts, and also identify any errors that need correcting before publication" (Kelly et al., 2014, p.228).

It has also been differently posited that, "peer review is the cornerstone of science, whose quality and efficiency depends on a complex, large-scale collaboration process" (Squazzoni et al, 2017, p.502). In other words, peer review is critical to scientific knowledge production (Horbach & Halffman, 2019; Kumbhare & Raman, 2021). Jackson et al (2018, p.95) still opine that "peer review is central to academic publishing. Yet for many it is a mysterious and contentious practice, which can cause distress for both reviewers and those whose work is reviewed". The current contribution is further aimed at decreasing the surrounding contentions.

A literature review on peer review

In a wide-ranging international study Mulligan et al. (2013) measured the thoughts of over 4,000 scholars on peer review. Mulligan et al. (2013, p.132) reports that "in 2009, 40,000 authors of research papers from across the globe were invited to complete an online survey, researchers were asked to rate a number of general statements about peer review, and then a subset of respondents, who had themselves peer reviewed, rated a series of statements concerning their experience of peer review. The study found that the peer review process is highly regarded by the vast majority of researchers and considered by most to be essential to the communication of scholarly research". According to Mulligan et al. (2013, p.132) "nine out of 10 authors believed that peer review improved the last paper they published. Double-blind peer review was considered the most effective form of peer review. Nearly three quarters of the researchers thought that technological advances were making peer review more effective. Most researchers believed that although peer review should identify fraud, it is very difficult for it to do so". The researchers concluded that "reviewers were committed to conducting peer review in the future and believed that simple practical steps, such as training new reviewers would further improve peer review" (Mulligan et al., 2013, p.132).

Tvina et al. (2019, p.1081) note that "peer review is the major method used by the scientific community to evaluate manuscripts and decide what is suitable for publication. However, this process in its current design is not bulletproof and is prone to reviewer and editorial bias. Its lack of objectivity and transparency raise concerns that manuscripts might be judged based on interests irrelevant to the content itself and not on merit alone". According to Kelly et al. (2014, p.242) "peer review has become fundamental in assisting editors in selecting credible, high quality, novel and interesting research papers to publish in scientific journals and to ensure the correction of any errors or issues present in submitted papers". They further posit as follows:

Though the peer review process still has some flaws and deficiencies, a more suitable screening method for scientific papers has not yet been proposed or developed. Researchers have begun and must continue to look for means of addressing the current issues with peer review to ensure that it is a full-proof system that ensures only quality research papers are released into the scientific community (Kelly et al., 2014, p.242).

Ochsner et al. (2020, p.1) "identifies the challenges particularly relevant for the SSH, such as different and thus often conflicting research paradigms or epistemological styles of reviewers and applicants or authors; difficulty in many SSH disciplines to define and evaluate research methodology compared to science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) disciplines; the lack of the idea of linear progress and a much longer time span necessary to evaluate academic impact of publications; the diversity of

publication outputs and specific importance of books or monographs; the importance of local languages; challenges related to recent developments in research and its evaluation related to growing interdisciplinarity and the Open Science agenda”.

In their report, Ochsner et al. (2020, p.1) conclude that peer review “fulfills different functions and that peer review practices not only need to acknowledge different disciplinary particularities but also their evaluative context. Rather than playing metrics and peer review off against each other, the focus should be on their optimal use and combination within different evaluation situations”. They posit that “this is especially important when it concerns the SSH because the disciplines falling under this umbrella term share the concurrency of different paradigms and a context-dependent, sometimes interpretative mode of knowledge generation and the use of a wide range of dissemination channels and this leads to a particular challenge regarding the burden of reviewers because SSH discipline” (Ochsner et al., 2020, p.1). Therefore, “the SSH disciplines should develop their own ways to adequately evaluate their research, and peer review takes an important part in that as the past has shown that automatically copying evaluation procedures from STEM disciplines did not always work out well” (Ochsner et al., 2020, p.1).

The contribution of Parsi & Elster (201, p.3) has also thrown appreciable light on the peer review heritage and its subsequent contours. They highlight that “peer review has been around for nearly three centuries and is simply the process whereby editors send submitted manuscripts to be evaluated by experts in the field. So that in enlisting the help of experts, editors ensure that manuscripts receive a thorough review and critique and this practice did not take hold until the middle of the 20th century”. Parsi & Elster (201, p.3) underscore that “before then, editors reviewed manuscripts without the help of external experts and made decisions on their own about whether to publish new work but now, editors rely heavily upon the assistance of external reviewers. This external review is intended to not only benefit the editor, but also the reader, the author, and the discipline as a whole”. The current work is also intended to benefit the editors, reviewers, authors and ultimately the readers in the social sciences of the emergent world regions in specificity, and the world of scholarship in general.

Between knowledge explosion and knowledge production: semantics and realities

Semantically, knowledge production should precede knowledge explosion but semantics and realities do not always rhyme. There is therefore the seeming contradiction bordering on some crises of knowledge production in the midst of knowledge explosion. This then introduces the concept of relevant knowledge, as knowledge consequently becomes relative. Thus, this contribution begins to approach the scenario of the germane peer reviewer, in the chain of knowledge production, in an era of knowledge explosion. Then methodologically, this paper elides the functions of the peer reviewer (under the ideal setting), which is quite a plausible area for future research undertakings.

The trend interrogation

The tasks of this subsection of the work are executed under the following subheadings: commercialization of peer review, the incidence of academic universal donors in peer review and the phenomenon of conceptual mismatch in peer review. The other subheads are: condemning a paper on the bases of grammatical shortcomings and magisterial peer reviewing.

Commercialization of peer review

Traditionally, peer reviewers were not paid (Academy, 2022). But a major new trend in peer review in some locations is the attachment of monetary rewards to the academic exercise. It then implies that the higher the payment, the greater the quality of work that would be done by the peer reviewer. Inversely, when the cash reward is on the meager side, the reviewer justifiably performs this function meagerly. It may truly read like sophism to pro-payment reviewers but the position of this paper is that peer reviewers should not receive cash rewards. Reviewers indeed already occupy a remarkably elevated and revered position in the scalar chain of knowledge production. The reviews they render may be considered as giving back to a system that has found them worthy of such privileges.

The incidence of academic universal donors in peer review

The paper now takes a resort to the medical sciences for analogy. In medical tendencies and specifically in blood transfusion, there is a terminology of “universal donor” even in its professionally

contentious syntax. Pruthi (2022, p.1) explains that “for emergency transfusions, blood group type O negative blood is the variety of blood that has the lowest risk of causing serious reactions for most people who receive it. Because of this, it is sometimes called the universal blood donor type”. Pruthi (2022, p.1) further illustrates:

Blood is also classified by rhesus (Rh) factor. Ideally, blood transfusions are done with donated blood that's an exact match for type and Rh factor. Even then, small samples of the recipient's and donor's blood are mixed to check compatibility in a process known as crossmatching. In an emergency, type O negative red blood cells may be given to anyone, especially if the situation is life-threatening or the matching blood type is in short supply.

In contradiction to the notion of medical universal donors, the academic universal donors in peer review harbor the greatest risk of causing serious reactions for most people who receive their donations. They are actually usually damaging in their unselective donations. Their donations are not based on the matching of types and Rh factors (Research History factors). Donations by academic universal donors in peer review are not usually based on compatibility and crossmatching, neither are such donations based on life-threatening circumstances. The academic universal donors in peer review merely donate by reviewing papers that come their way, irrespective of their not being adept in such fields.

The phenomenon of conceptual mismatch in peer review

Implicit in the concept of peer review is an assumption of expertise. The expert assesses a submission forwarded to him or her and renders an objective report on its suitability for publication. Lexically also, peer review refers to a review by someone that is of identical standing with another (the author or authors of a submission). This entails similarity of competencies between authors and reviewers. Under the current conceptual mismatch tendencies in some locations, belongingness to the same geographical region is taken as qualification for review of a paper (by an author from such a location). Are one's peers in academic peer review merely researchers from the same geographical area?

Again, it appears plausible that if a researcher's contribution has never been adjudged publishable by certain classes of highly reputable journals, he/she cannot also be the appropriate peer reviewer for a submission made to such a class of journals. Adair & Vohra (2003, p.15) consequently observes that “knowledge explosion has created enormous difficulties for researchers to be aware of, access, and process the volume of new literature”. For reviewers also, knowledge explosion has given rise to massive challenges in the area of being conversant with new processes and new literature.

Condemnations based on grammatical shortcomings

In knowledge production stages as it relates to article publication in journals, there are ideally proof readers and there are also copy editors. It seems to be knowledge explosion that has paradoxically tended to make some current peer reviewers to serve in the dual capacity of proof readers and copy editors as well. In the process of concentrating on the linguistic and syntactic aspects of the submission, the reviewer obviously overlooks originality and scientific contribution.

Magisterial peer reviewing

Peer reviewers should never appear magisterial. Of course the peer reviewer needs to distinguish between the current assignment that he/she has been given and the jobs of the editor(s). A reviewer in Journal A could be an editor (Editor-in-Chief) in Journal B. Knowledge explosion has however made it possible that some participants in the knowledge production of the journal publication hue, fail to acknowledge when they act in either of the capacities. Reviewers should primarily consider originality when presented with manuscripts. Originality is a pointer to significance. Invariably, validity flows from originality and significance. The magisterial reviewer most times converts the paper into his or her own ideas to be endorsed by the author(s). It is a slightly different case in disciplines such as medicine where the peer reviewer may possess the added role of stopping the author from arriving at life-threatening conclusions and generalizations. Social science scholarship thrives on scientific debates. In any case, in no discipline is the peer reviewed paper a document of absolute truth. In all disciplines therefore, the peer reviewed work is still prone to disputations, re-review and revalidation (Kharasch et al, 2021).

Conclusion

Finally, the trend observations in the paper are not considered exhaustive. It has fundamentally been demonstrated in the work that knowledge explosion in some poignant trajectories possesses integral challenges. These intrinsic problematic may manifest through evolutionary tendencies in knowledge production. Some contentious peer review trends in some research locations have been identified in support of this thesis. The contribution is essentially aimed at better peer review productivity in such environments. The paper is classifiable as an exploratory research. It has accordingly not discountenanced the certainty of progressive peer review trends in some other locations. Inherent in the design of the paper is the proposal for further research on the subject matter and an interest in the continuity of the embedded debates.

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