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A Multifaceted Approach Is Needed to Respond to the Plight of Bioethicists in Accessing Literature

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Chattopadhyay and colleagues (2017) advocate that bioethics and biomedical literature be freely available and accessible, regardless of scholars' paying ability or geographic location. They propose that leading bioethics journals make access to their content free; that bioethics journals published by nonprofit commercial publishers make their content available to all scholars in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), regardless of HINARI-related status; and that commercial publishers provide low-priced editions of their journals and books for LMIC scholars. They also argue that practitioners of bioethics should commit to supporting alternative models of publishing and distribution of literature, including online journals, and that commercial publishers of subscription-based international bioethics journals and other online journals institute waivers of publication fees and article processing charges for all authors from LMICs.

The incisive proposal of Chattopadhyay and colleagues, however, overlooks some important issues. First, journals have specific aims, scope, and audiences that are shaped by specific ideologies. These influence the trajectory of published research manuscripts, as well as the moral basis for rejecting manuscripts. Therefore, asking that international bioethics journals open up to non-Western philosophical systems and worldviews is at best supererogatory if the issues at stake do not cohere with the agendas of such journals. At worse, it entails that such journals forgo their original missions. Also, including an LMIC scholar on the board of an international journal (as Chattopadhyay and colleagues suggest) cannot automatically open up such a journal to non-Western conceptual trajectories if the scope remains unaltered.

Publishing, whether in print or online and whether for the sake of knowledge or profit, inevitably incurs costs (Beyer 1978). Indeed, some of the top-rated LMIC-based journals require that authors pay a fee. Also, some scholars in LMICs seem to have no financial qualms about patronizing predatory journals to advance their careers. But Chattopadhyay and colleagues propose that commercial, Western-based bioethics journals waive all author-related charges for scholars from LMICs. Although this may appear to be a small sacrifice, imagine a scenario where at least 80% of articles in a particular journal issue were written

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by LMIC scholars. Who would bear the attendant cost? Also, a free-publishing policy would likely increase the rate at which LMIC bioethicists submit manuscripts to journals that adopt it. Without resolving the financial conundrum, this may lead to articles being rejected, not on the basis of lack of merit but to reduce financial losses. Should this occur, the goal that Chattopadhyay and colleagues seek to achieve would be missed.

Chattopadhyay and colleagues also appear to assume that bioethical reflection in the West is cohesive and diametrically opposed to how it is pursued in non-Western contexts. This is far from the case. For instance, Holm and Williams-Jones (2006) found that the citation and buying patterns of bioethics literature in the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, France, and Germany are not uniform, nor do they reflect thematic unity. Although bioethicists may seek a common ethical vision, each tends to draw from familiar sociocultural and disciplinary terrains. Hence, the inattention that bioethics pays to LMIC-related issues cannot be completely ascribed to some deliberate epistemic conspiracy. Rather, the underlying causes are primarily structural.

Global bioethics involves seeking broader solutions to ethical issues elicited by health, disease, life, and death (ten Have 2016). However, the rhetoric and concepts with which bioethical issues are engaged are hardly embedded in local sociocultural realities. This stems, in part, from the historical integration and subordination of local systems to the world system of knowledge and “know-how” (Hountondji 1990). It is also a by-product of the fact that health care, a key aspect of bioethics, is generally divorced from local realities in LMICs, aided in part by a retinue of local health professionals and officials (Afolabi 2011). The “missionary” nature of bioethics further orients local bioethics stakeholders toward adopting Western lenses, as well as pursuing issues that appeal mostly to Western sensibilities. Whether or not this is deliberate, bioethics has received criticisms of ethical imperialism and neocolonialism in relation to this trend (De Vries and Rott 2011; Fayemi and Macaulay-Adeyelu 2016). Reversing this lies in how LMIC bioethicists choose to pursue their intellectual inquiries.

A pivotal part of the tenure requirements for LMIC scholars and bioethicists involves publishing some of their overall research in international journals. Such a policy creates a pseudomoral lens that defines “valid” academic scholarship. It also reduces the unencumbered pursuit of academic investigations, nudging researchers toward adjusting their searchlight to the themes of foreign journals. However, the moral obligation for reversing the ensuing cycle of intellectual hegemony falls on LMIC scholars (as departmental chairs and deans) because they alone can reverse such policies that specifically favor pro-Western research.

Bioethicists working in LMICs are not the only victims of the constraints of literature dissemination. Indeed, a lot of full text and abstracts of research containing useful knowledge that scholars in LMICs furnish in their locally published journals and books are not accessible, in print or via online avenues, to non-LMIC researchers. These sometimes reflect poorly on the quality of some of the scholarship published in Western-based journals. Based on our personal experiences, we believe that there are other scholars, originally from LMICs, who have come across articles in top-rated journals whose merits are epistemically

shortchanged by the absence of two or more sources long published in an LMIC-based journal or book chapter. This shows that the problem of literature access is not regional and that it affects the global nature of scholarly conversations.

Publication remains a central aspect of academic research, partly because it offers a nexus for the elaboration and critique of academic knowledge (Parker 2013). This underscores the importance of overcoming regional and global hindrances to accessing bioethics literature. A multifaceted approach to the plight of bioethicists in accessing literature may involve reciprocation, transnational cooperation, and engagement of background factors that exploit the publish-or-perish mantra. For publishers of pay-for-access journals that have outsourced part of the publication process to LMICs (to decrease costs and increase profits), the argument can be made that they have a moral obligation to recompense scholars in such countries by granting them free access and by providing discounts to other LMIC scholars.

Transnational cooperation is another means of increasing free access to bioethics literature in a two-way fashion. In this vein, institution-based journals in LMICs as well as individual researchers can make their work available through free online platforms such as ResearchGate and Academia.edu, whose databases are indexed in research-retrieving websites, including Google Scholar. In addition to eliminating some of the constraints that researchers within LMICs experience in accessing research published by other LMIC researchers, this model can be replicated by bioethicists in non-LMICs. Also, when attending conferences in Euro-American universities or participating in visiting fellowships and other educational programs, LMIC scholars may donate to libraries some of their personal copies of journals. The information-sharing arrangements that most libraries in the West have with one another can ensure that such collections are incorporated into globally accessible databases. This model can also be replicated by Western scholars when they visit research institutions in LMICs.

At the heart of the last set of remarks is the issue of copyrights. This is important because commercial journals generally ask authors to sign over their copyright. If bioethicists genuinely care about issues that come to the fore within their vocation, those who serve on the editorial boards of copyright-restricting journals should have no qualms in protesting such policies. Since it is difficult to imagine a bioethics journal operating without the input of bioethicists as peer reviewers, one can speculate that copyright constraints to self-dissemination of scholarly publications could be readily expunged.

The publish-or-perish policy reflects the high premium placed on academic creativity and drives the appointment, promotion, salary increases, and the grants appeal of scholars. Yet the pressure it engenders often compels some scholars to compromise on quality by tailoring research output to needs of journals, rather than publishing the right material at the right time and via the right outlet (Beard 1965; Brown 2008). Joined to commercialism, the publish-or-perish policy contributes to predatory publishing and negatively shapes the quality of academic scholarship. The moral implication of this should spur bioethicists, as principal stakeholders in the publishing sector, to exert more influence on the publication process. This could be accomplished by refusing to serve on the boards of predatory journals and by using their roles on the boards of reputable journals to influence the cost and access

to such periodicals. Publications shape the impact and application of knowledge (Chan, Arunachalam, and Kirsop 2009). In facilitating a post-paywall paradigm, scholars therefore have an obligation to seek creative approaches to engaging the constraints of literature access.

Thus far, we have argued that the problem of access to relevant literature is not confined to LMICs and that it raises questions about the global nature of academic conversation through journals. In critiquing the proposal of Chattopadhyay and colleagues, we argued that a multifaceted approach is essential vis-à-vis responding to the plight of bioethicists in accessing literature from around the globe.

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