

Challenges in journal publishing in the Arab world.

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Editorial

Challenges in Journal Publishing in the Arab World

Ian M. Johnson

INTRODUCTION

After taking an interest in the development of library and information services in the Arab world for almost 40 years, and attending the annual conference of the Arabian Gulf Chapter of the Special Libraries Association several times, I was very pleased to learn that the Chapter has decided to sponsor a new online journal. The announcement reached me just as I was about to complete the final tasks that I had set myself before withdrawing completely from active involvement in the field. Whilst I felt unable to make a continuing contribution to the development of the SLA-AGC's new journal, I did wonder whether there was anything that I could do now that might help to stimulate relevant future developments.

This brief note aims to identify a few of the contemporary challenges facing the information sector that should be addressed by all journal publishers, including those in the Arabic-speaking world. In particular, it seems useful to draw attention to the fact that both practitioners' awareness of developments in library and information work and academics' research are held back by the incomplete bibliographic listing of relevant books published in the Arab world and inadequacy of indexing of the Arabic journals. Even if that could be improved, accessing Arab books and the contents of journals would remain a problem, the result of poor distribution and availability.

INDEXING AND AWARENESS

Over the last few years, I have been carrying out a major study of the interaction between and relative impact of foreign assistance and domestic circumstances, using library development in Iraq as a case study. I began my research by examining the bibliographies of librarianship in the Arab world that have been published in English and the major indexing English-language indexing and abstracting services in the field, but as soon as I began reading the journal articles and books that they listed, I immediately became aware of many publications that were used as references to support those texts but not included in the standard bibliographies and indexes.¹ These did not include much of the Arabic material that Mohammed Abd el Hadi has listed during the last 40 years in the printed bibliographies of the Arab librarianship that he has compiled.^{2,3,4} There are now one or two publishers who are attempting to produce indexes to the journals published in the Arabic-speaking world, and make them available as subscription services on the Internet. The awareness and coverage of journals in the library and information field may depend on the editors of the journals reaching mutually beneficial agreements with those companies to ensure that their journals are regularly indexed.

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BIBLIOGRAPHIC CONTROL — ISBN, ISSN, AND ORCID

One of the long-running debates about the bibliographic control of modern publications in Arabic has been the format of authors' names. This has been the result of the variable quantity of patronymics that individual authors choose to use, the insertion of terms that denote the author's observation of the requirement to undertake the Haj, the occasional use of the immediate parent's name as if it were a surname in western style cataloguing, and variations in transliteration.

In recent years, there has been a recognition that Arabic is not alone in encountering such a problem. Western authors publish their work using various combinations of their forenames and/or initials — and I must confess that I had myself issued several publications as Ian Johnson or I.M. Johnson before settling into the regular usage that you see at the head of this paper. But, because of the growth of academia and academic publishing, there are now so many people with similar names writing for publication that their work covers a wide variety of disciplines. This has created new challenges for information retrieval systems, and a solution had to be found.

During the last century, International Standard Book Numbers (ISBN) were introduced to facilitate the international sale of books, and then International Standard Serial Numbers (ISSN) were introduced to assist identification of journals because of the rapid growth in the number that were being published. We now have an emerging international standard for recognising authors: ORCID (Open Researcher and Contributor ID), which provides a free, persistent digital identifier that distinguishes every individual author. Its inclusion in every publication (thesis, book, chapter or journal article) supports automated linkages that ensure that an individual's work is recognized. The major commercial publishers are beginning to adopt it. Every journal needs not only to register for an ISSN and include it in each and every issue (which is not yet universal practice for Arab journals), but also to require that the author of every paper is registered with ORCID (<https://orcid.org/>) and includes the registration number in the statement of affiliation at the beginning of his paper.

DISTRIBUTION AND ACCESS

The problem then becomes one of access to the full text of the books and papers that are identified.

The international trade of books within the Arab world is still inhibited by incomplete or delayed bibliographic coverage of new publications, the small number of copies printed, distribution costs, and currency controls. Library collections of Arabic books depend too much on random purchases at book fairs.

The availability of Arabic journals also remains a major issue. Academic journal publishing in the Arab world has mostly been undertaken by universities and research councils. Publishing for professions was initiated by associations that initially had few members. Copies of new issues were often distributed free of charge to libraries in other institutions and representatives of other associations. Changes in institutional and association financial and organisational strengths and weaknesses determined not only the frequency of a journal's publication but also how consistently copies of issues were distributed. The result was that few libraries had a complete set of all the issues of a journal.

Online publishing, and particularly through open access, could go some way to solving the problem of distribution as good connections to the Internet become more widely available and used. The use of a publishing medium such as the Open Journal System (<https://pkp.sfu.ca/ojs/>) could facilitate this.

The number of online journals being published in the Arab world in all fields is still small. In the library and information field there are probably even fewer, and, with notable exceptions such as the 'Cybrarians' journal, they remain little known. A challenge for any new online journal is how to raise awareness of its existence. One way in which this is being undertaken in Latin America, another large region with a common language and a history of publishing problems similar to those found in the Arabic-speaking world, is through the establishment of national and international aggregator services, such as INFOBILA and REDALYC, which hold either the complete texts of journals from a wide variety of publishers in every subject field, or indexes of their contents with hot links to the original articles. The early experience of ALECSO in trying to establish a cooperative bibliography of books published in every Arab country is not encouraging,⁵ and suggests that there may be a need for some other organisation with an international base in the Arab countries and access to some of their wealth to take a lead in addressing this problem.

AVAILABILITY AND ARCHIVING

Another of the challenges facing the readers of any journal is the permanent availability of older issues. If the publishers of traditional printed journals ever thought about that, they probably assumed that copies would be stored in a library or libraries somewhere. One of the consequences of poor distribution of Arabic printed journals is that complete sets of printed issues of a journal are not widely available, and are sometimes not even available in the library of the institution or archives of the association that published them. Some cooperative efforts are being made, particularly in the U.S.A., to identify copies of every available issue of early Arab scholarly journals so that they can be digitised and made searchable and freely available online. That will have some benefits for researchers in the history of the library and information work as many papers in the field were published in journals of a general nature because there were few specialist ones. However, there appears to be no work being undertaken at the moment to identify the location of copies of the specialist journals that have been or are being published in the library and information field. Indeed, no one really seems to know how many there are or have been.

Digital publishing presents new challenges. Part of the costs that the major commercial electronic publishers seek to recover is the cost of maintaining the digital back-file of the journals that they issue. Even so, they have also, slowly, accepted the need to have a second back-up file that would be secure in case of disasters, and free from the risk of text being altered by a hacker. They have tended to place the back-up file in the national library in the country in which they are based, often because the legislation there has been updated so that they are legally required to deposit copies of digital publications in the national library. Other publishers need a similar long-term strategy for the location of the publication and archiving for their online journals.

Author

After working in public libraries, assisting the British government's Library Advisers, and managing the continuing education programme at the College of Librarianship Wales, Ian Johnson led the School of Librarianship and Information Studies at the Robert Gordon University through a period of major change and achievement in both teaching and research, and then became Associate Dean of the Aberdeen Business School, responsible for its teaching quality and resource development. He was Chairman of national and international bodies concerned with library and information education, as well as IFLA's Professional Board. He worked on development projects in schools of librarianship and libraries the Arab world, in Eastern Europe, and in Latin America. He has published extensively in the field, and was the Editor or a member of the advisory boards of several scholarly journals, and Editor of IFLA's book series 'Global Studies in Libraries and Information'.

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