A guideline to “Publishing in different academic communities”

Introduction

Every researcher who has assumed the endeavour of scientific work has taken a responsibility to contribute to and expand the existing state of knowledge in his respective field of interest. There are, of course, a very wide range of research fields, branches and topics existing and many more evolving each day. It is of paramount importance to perform quality research work to deliver valuable knowledge which advances these fields. All such reliable and useful research also needs to be made available to other researchers, practitioners and stakeholders. Recording the data chronologically updates each research stream and enables the said stakeholders to positively advance or to effectively utilize the knowledge. Therefore, the research that is being performed across the world by several thousands of researchers needs to be logged and made available in an organized and legitimately accessible manner.

Publishing enables the storage, access, and advancement of all the scientific knowledge that is continuously being created. Over time, based on the research fields or subject, “the activity of publishing” has itself evolved and developed traits and characteristics exponentially. Therefore, a researcher who wishes to become part of scientific world, in order to make his/her presence meaningful and effective needs to understand “academic publishing” and hence the following.

1. Why publish? – Importance of publishing, and relevance to scientific work
2. What to publish? – A good research paper and its characteristics
3. Where to publish? – Different academic communities and their properties
4. How to publish? – Dealing with the process of publishing

These above mentioned aspects are, largely, addressed by this course “Publishing in different academic communities” which is held by Prof Martinuzzi. The following of this paper attempts to selectively present the learnings and important lessons that I obtained through this course. The first four sections, summarizes the four broad questions above and then some additional key takeaways are summarised in the last section.

1. Why publish?

Let us assume that we as researchers and members of scientific community understand very well that “publishing”, in a broader perspective, serves the ultimate purpose of
recording knowledge being created and making it accessible. Also, as researchers there are certain narrower interests, that we all carry, when we talk about publishing.

Publishing means acceptance of the accomplished research work as scientific and credible. For some such as PhD students it can be part of necessary requirement to acquire a doctoral degree. Also, for a researcher to pursue an academic career, his/her credibility is demonstrated based on the quality and quantity of the publications produced. Usually, ambitious researchers aim to produce in high quality journals to validate the quality of work and be better visible to others who are working in similar topics. Generally three to four “A” grade publications build a strong profile to apply for professorship. Papers/authors which receive more citations, which is reflected by citation index (<1: low, 1-2: OK/good, >3: Excellent), are considered to have a higher scientific impact in the field of research.

Therefore publishing right brings a great deal of recognition to a researcher and, hence, helps progressing more prospectively. Or it can simply be a sense of achievement or motivation booster for researchers.

2. What to publish?

A research paper is the primary practice to clearly express its relevance to the field and the contribution of the work. As important as it is that the research work advances the existing debate or topic in the field of interest, it is also important that the work is well articulated and presented to the scientific community. Therefore attention has to be paid to the process of writing and structuring a research paper that is legitimate enough to be published.

Approach of a research paper

To start with, the approach of the paper must be able to demonstrate a logical story line presentation; which can be as follows:

1. Introduce the real world problems or the motivation of the research. Also, check for the current state of the debate to avoid redundancy.

2. Translate it to scientific problems in academic context. i.e., rephrase the real world problems as scientific problems. Establish what we know and what we don’t.

3. Indicate the prevalent gaps in knowledge and benefits of expediting them. This also iterates the value of the work and motivation.
4. Convey the methodology chosen for research. Appropriate scientifically proven qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods.

5. Present and discuss the observations and findings.

6. Finally, conclude by discussing how the research address the real world problems and the motivation of the research. Also, indicate any additional findings or questions that prompt further research.

The research paper should express its scientific nature whether it discovers, explains, predicts or applies scientific knowledge. Also a good research paper should take care to highlight elements such as object of research, originality, validity, scientific and practical implications and limitations of the research work. Title of the paper should be precise and adequate to enfold the contents of the paper. Use most relevant and specific keywords to index your manuscript. Indicate clearly the first author and corresponding author (senior author from the institution), if any, while avoiding ghost authorship (missing authors) or gift authorship (non-contributing authors). An abstract for a paper is extremely important too, since it offers a quick summary and worth of the whole work to a reader/reviewer and establishes its first impression.

The structure of a scientific paper can categorically be understood in three levels—

- Macro level - Main chapters of the paper. Mostly standardized.
- Meso level - Flow of ideas/text and order of paragraphs in each chapter, and
- Micro level - Syntax, wording, interpretations, citations, style etc.

The phrasing should be precise, expressive and memorable so that for others it is effectively quotable without distortion. The use of technical language should be limited and precise. Personal pronouns may be used only to emphasise personal opinions, usually used in the introduction or conclusion chapters. Long and confusing sentences must be avoided. Use figures and numbers wherever possible to help the reader understand the context. Avoid grand statements in conclusion of the paper that are not supported by the data in the paper. Such nuances of writing styles in academic context plays a vital role.

A well written paper is undoubtedly a product of a good writing process. Writing can become a cumbersome and unpleasant experience due to several reasons. Working under strong time pressure or no pressure at all, lot of distractions, no milestones, lack of inspiration or motivation, working on unorganized literature or incomplete data, lack of proper equipment/resources, too much anxiety, writing in a language or style that the
writer is not comfortable in, etc., are a few to mention. Therefore, academic writers need to pay attention to the process itself, and overcome chaotic writing. Techniques such as a) clustering – grouping features, concepts and arguments, b) mind-mapping – more formalized form of visualizing branches of arguments or chapters, or c) visualization – putting up the whole work on a wall as a poster using post-its, throughout the writing process can be employed.

Overall, “what to publish” is a research paper which clearly and vividly demonstrates value-added contribution to the existing scientific knowledge.

3. Where to publish?

Every researcher should know their home community, i.e. the community which comprises the research topic. Sometimes a topic can be shared between two or more communities. Understanding the home communities helps in identifying all the relevant elements for one’s research; such as relevant papers, concerned journals, prominent researchers and potential advisors, collaboration partners, funding and co-operation agencies, conferences etc. Scientific communities are virtual social networks offering apposite links administering research fields. Besides a shared vision and mission, a home community also offers awareness of the research directions and trends in the field.

There exists several communities with respect to the subject and field, and they differ considerably due to varying degree of maturity, and other factors such as professional associations or funding availability etc. It can be very helpful to be aware of the properties and dynamics of a scientific community while pitching one’s own research. Same paper cannot be submitted to different communities in the same way. Some communities also share common platforms viz., journals, due to shared sub-topics or interests. Such communities may have links and also work together by bringing in their respective expertise to the research. Older the communities, more elaborate, established and standardized are the research methods. For e.g., case studies are more acceptable in amateur communities. Also when a community is more mature it is more resilient to meta-level recommendations for e.g., policies, and reporting observations for future researchers might be more allowable.

One of the most important aspects that communities offer to a researcher is to identify the germane forums/journals to publish the research paper. Most relevant journals for a certain topic may be pinned down by Bibliometric citation analysis, by assessing on parameters such as number of journals, citation index, existing debate on your topic, ranking of journals etc. The researchers in a particular community tend to publish in certain journals and they bear a shared impression of quality of journals. In general, journals that have double blind review are considered good, and it is strictly advised to
avoid journals that accept payment for publications but does not perform a rigorous peer-review; these are considered worthless.

In order to be able to choose the right journal to publish your paper, know the aims and scope of the journal by checking their websites and recently published articles, understand the type of articles it publishes, whether it has local or global readership, and current hot topics. Do not hesitate to ask a colleague for advice when not fully aware.

A researcher, therefore, should be fully aware of the target journals to appropriately place his hard-work i.e. research paper.

4. How to publish?

After having identified an appropriate journal to publish the research paper, there are several aspects that needs to be taken into consideration in order to successfully get through the process of publishing.

After ensuring all the requirements (such as methodology) specific to communities in the research paper, one must be aware of the requirements of respective journals/publishers for the paper. Different journals have different styles and approaches, and different acceptable levels of deviation from the guidelines. So attention must be paid to the strictness of a journal. The review process also burdens certain care. The facets discussed in the section - “what to publish” might have to be adapted suitably. Moreover the information (for e.g., to explain terms or concepts) might need to be adjusted according to the readership of a journal, and its familiarity with the debate.

Before approaching a journal, certain final checks might prove useful, such as – revision or proof reading by colleagues (prevents early rejection) and/or a native speaker, re-check of requirements set out in the guide for authors, be sure that scope of the paper is appropriate for the journal, the literature is sufficiently and properly cited and the significance of the results are clear.

Some journals encourage cover letters for submission of the papers. Through a cover letter, other than convincing the journal editor to publish the paper, there is also an opportunity to slightly manipulate the review process, by suggesting potential reviewers based on their works. Confirm the originality of the submission and absence of competing financial interests in the letter.

The process of publishing is far from complete on submission of a full paper. The paper undergoes review process, based on journal, which is a very important step to scrutinize the quality of the research and requirements of the journal. A reviewer is usually provided certain guidelines by the journal for reviewing papers. It can be very helpful
for a researcher to take the role of reviewer for some journal to gain better understanding of a reviewer. It must be noted that the journal and reviewers are principally interested in your work, and the suggestions provided must be treated positively and considered as constructive criticism. All efforts to address reviewers’ feedback must be undertaken to the extent possible, even if it means additional experiments. And for those suggestions that you, and your advisor, consider not plausible or possibly misunderstood by the reviewer, a reasonably worded argument politely explaining to the editor and reviewer would work. All the changes and explanations against each of the reviewer’s and editor’s comments must be properly documented and sent over while re-submitting.

Depending on the journal and community, the acceptance level of good journals is usually 15-20% only. Which means despite of all your efforts if the paper still could not be accepted by the journal of your choice, it doesn’t mean the paper is bad. There could be other reasons such as - paper being out of scope, failing to format the paper as required, inappropriately suggested reviewers, inadequate responses to reviewers, inadequate standard of English, or resubmission of rejected manuscripts without revision.

Therefore, “how to publish” is an important lesson which needs to be meticulously managed to successfully publish papers.

5. Key takeaways

Even after a researcher is able to perform a quality research, if he is not able to articulate the work in an appropriate manner and be able to present it to the right communities in the right style, it might suffer the risk of remaining un-recognized. Therefore it is imperative that a good researcher should know the nuances and be well versed with the art of publishing. The summary of key takeaways are as follows:

- Know your community and all its properties.
- Develop an eye towards appropriate methods, style of writing as per requirements of the journals in your community.
- Organize the research work efficiently and plan your work schedule to make the whole work enjoyable.
• Avoid chaotic writing and take measures to make writing a pleasant experience. Practice free writing (writing without pausing for 20 minutes or so), or reading novels regularly to overcome writers block.

• Most importantly put in your best to master the practice of publishing without fearing rejections.