



Race and Racism in Academic Publishing: A Case Study from Elsevier

In a two-part special program, Copyright Clearance Center and Elsevier explore how race and racism shape the academic knowledge system. This first segment considers the internal challenges facing publishers and editors – from policies around terminology to processes that govern the selection of editorial boards.

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KENNEALLY: Hello. I'm Christopher Kenneally with Copyright Clearance Center. Welcome to a special two-part program that takes a fresh look at the extent to which race consciously and unconsciously influences all of us in the academic knowledge system. Where do we find such racism? In the experience of encountering individual racism on a personal level. In the institutional racism ingrained in the processes and culture of institutions. And to the extent to which race and racism are ingrained into how we experiment, assess, publish, and disseminate knowledge.

From Elsevier employees in the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States, we will hear of efforts undertaken to confront the stark reality of systemic inequality, not only in terms of the company's own role in research and health, but also how Elsevier is empowering staff to be aware of issues in equity, inclusion, and diversity, and to become active in efforts to accelerate change.

Elsevier is a leading information analytics and academic publisher in the area of science and health, employing around 8,000 staff internationally. The company, like most other publishers, has taken a firm stance against racism and discrimination. This program will share how at Elsevier employee resource groups, editorial teams, and leadership are taking the first steps toward creating greater ethnic diversity.

In this first segment, the discussion will focus on the internal challenges facing publishers and editors. The questions concerned range from policies around terminology to processes that govern the selection of editorial boards. Our program moderator is Michiel Kolman, Elsevier's senior vice president of information industry relations and academic ambassador. He is past president of the International Publishers Association and is IPA's special envoy for diversity and inclusion. Michiel Kolman is the executive sponsor of Elsevier Pride and was listed two years in a row in the *Financial Times* top 100 ranking of most influential



LGBT senior executives. He joins me from Amsterdam. Welcome to the program, Michiel Kolman.

KOLMAN: Thank you, Chris. It's great to be back here.

KENNEALLY: We're happy to have you join us, Michiel. Tell us a bit about how you would like to conduct the program here.

KOLMAN: Yeah, so I'd like to start with a quick introduction to set the stage. Then I'll introduce the panelists. And then we'll have our conversation with everybody pitching in.

So let me start immediately with the introduction. To set the bigger picture, I think it's important to realize that diversity is a spectrum with many different lenses. It can cover, for instance, gender, sexual orientation, age, physical ability, but it also covers what we're zooming in today, and that's ethnicity.

The business case is very clear. More diverse companies perform better, and publishers who embrace diversity and create an inclusive culture will be more successful today and in the future. This type of diversity means that we all want to see a change in our leadership for more diverse boards taking decisions, but also we want to look around the work floor, in our warehouses, and see a diverse mix of people that reflects the society in which we're based.

Additionally, there's a unique role that publishers can play. We can act as catalysts of change simply through our role of publishing high-quality and trusted, curated content. For trade publishers, this is about finding diverse authors and fostering audiences who love to read unique and powerful perspectives. It's about textbooks that, for instance, reflect current society, but also foster children's minds to think that regardless of their ethnicity or gender, they too can become president, doctor, engineer, or a ballet dancer. For science, where critical thinking, debating, and different perspectives are fundamental elements for success, STM publishers can equally play a role in stimulating diversity in the design of research studies, editorial boards, or even give international platforms for research that comes from other countries other than the US, the UK, or China.

Let's first look at ourselves. How diverse are we in the publishing industry? When we look at our Zoom calls, when we return to our book fairs and conferences and events, how diverse are we, really? And are we getting more diverse or less? Simple questions, but not so easy to answer, I'm afraid. That's partly because in our industry, we don't really have international benchmarking surveys. But we have three really outstanding studies that can help set the scene.



The first one is in the US, an update from the 2015 survey by the multicultural children's book publisher Lee & Low. The second one is in the UK, which is the third annual study already by the Publishers Association. And the third one, just released literally last week by Penguin Random House, who have made their own diversity study result public.

What is the outcome? That's also shown in some of the slides. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, both the US studies have found that in 2019, the publishing industry is predominantly white, 76%, female, 74%, straight, 81%, and non-disabled, 89%. The overall percentage in the US identifying as white is 72%, so the 76% for the publishing industry is a bit above the national average. However, the percentage of whites is only 45% in a city like New York, where most of the large publishing houses are located. In that light, 76% is not in line with the local population. When you go to the executive level, the figures become a little bit less white, less straight, and reported more disability, which is encouraging.

Now, the recent study from Penguin Random House, they report improvement in hiring more diverse workforces in 2020, with slight increases in hiring African Americans, Hispanics, and Asian Americans. In 2016, 79% of all new hires were white, compared to 70.9% so far in 2020. In 2016, 3.6% of the new hires were African American, and today, that is 6.5%, so we've seen quite a nice jump there.

An interesting point made by the Penguin Random House US CEO, Madeline McIntosh, who identified a key challenge for a more diverse workforce, is the very low turnover of staff, citing that often staff spend their entire career in the publishing houses, making change a very slow evolution. I've personally been to blame for that, because I've been with Elsevier for 25 years.

In the UK, ethnicity is categorized using the term BAME, Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic. The UK Publishers Association reported the BAME representation 2019, and it was 12% for the UK. That is below the 15% they set themselves. Overall in the UK, the BAME share is 14%. Within London, it goes up to 40%. So the 12% in our publishing industry is certainly far below the London average. While there are good programs around BAME in place, it turns out it's very difficult to attract and also to retain non-white staff.

So where can this take us? Things are improving. Progress can be slow. But these studies definitely show that we're moving in the right direction. We do need an inclusive culture to retain a diverse workforce. If progress is slow, we actually need more diversity allies. Everyone needs to recognize the issues, get informed,



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and start getting involved. We need more data. These studies highlight the lack of research and benchmarking outside of the US and UK.

Which brings us to this panel, where we will be discussing some of the key questions, but also providing some real insights how to take initial steps to become more inclusive in terms of ethnicity. So I'm very happy to introduce all the panelists. Today, we have on our panel Kevonne Holloway all the way from the US. Kevonne, welcome.

HOLLOWAY: Thank you. Hello.

KOLMAN: You are the vice-president for education content. Can you tell us a little bit more about that?

HOLLOWAY: Sure. I have responsibility as the vice-president of education content for Elsevier in the US for managing an acquisitions team that is responsible for working with authors and thought leaders in the market to create our curated content.

KOLMAN: Great. Thank you to have you here. Our other panelist is Elliott Parris, who's from London. Elliott, I think you're responsible for northern Europe for our chemistry portfolio. Can you tell us a little bit more about that?

PARRIS: That's correct. (inaudible) as well. So my role at Elsevier is spanning the area of northern Europe and predominantly speaking to leaders in chemistry and sometimes in biology as well. What I'm doing is selling solutions that can be used to make new medicines, for example, in smarter ways using the data that Elsevier has and also external data as well as internal data.

KOLMAN: Great, thank you. Good to have you here. Our third panelist is back in the US – John Pham, editor-in-chief at Cell Press. John, do you want to introduce yourself?

PHAM: Sure. I'm the editor-in-chief at *Cell*. *Cell* is a longstanding, well regarded biomedical journal. My role is to put out *Cell* every two weeks. We consider a lot of the world's most cutting-edge science. Right now, we're up to our necks with COVID-19 studies, recruiting those, peer reviewing them, making sure that they're sound and solid, and disseminating them to the world. So my role mostly is to make sure that we publish an awesome journal that we can all be proud of.

KOLMAN: Great to have you on board as well. Let me go to the first question. As publishers and editors, we are very much aware of the powers of words. How



important is terminology in the discussions around race, and what terminology do you use from the US and the UK perspective? Maybe from a US perspective, I can start with Kevonne.

HOLLOWAY: Thank you. Terminology is critical and core to conversations around diversity and inclusion. It provides and illuminates a shared understanding as well as a mutual respect of perspective. Terminology is so important to us at Elsevier that we actually provide our authors and copyeditors with guidelines for style as well as inclusive language to ensure that the content that we peer-review and disseminate is representative of all individuals and reflects diversity across the spectrum.

KOLMAN: Great, thank you. Elliott, what is the perspective from the UK?

PARRIS: I think I might build on the BAME concern in a second. I suppose my identity as being a Black person in the UK – I have a background of mixed heritage, so white on my mom’s side from Wales, my exotic side, and then my dad’s side is Caribbean. I think it’s challenging that my grandparents, for example, would have called me half-caste, and I hear that of my grandparents’ generation, whereas my mom’s generation would call me mixed-race.

I think that’s even challenging in itself, because like *castus* comes from the Latin for pure. So when you’re calling someone half-pure, that calls them not pure. In terms of calling, I suppose, me now mixed-race, in Spanish and Portuguese, caste is the word that is used. Again, it comes from *castus*, so it’s the same thing, just 20 or 30 years on.

I think how our identity is in the UK is somewhat different to the US. If I was a US citizen, I would identify as being African American, so it’d be more simple. But I think it’s more nuanced in the UK. I think that’s us trying to hide the realities of what it actually means. I think that’s where terminology is important.

And then coming to the BAME point, there’s been a lot of criticism of it in the UK. I think the context of that was the Public Health England report where a lot of information was redacted actually exploring the details of why people of Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic backgrounds were having worse outcomes from COVID-19. That was the challenge – that they removed that information not really about the term itself. I think it’s just the context of it was a challenge in my eyes. The terminology’s not too important. It’s more what are we going to against the racism which we face?



KOLMAN: Great, thank you. Super to have these two different perspectives from both sides of the Atlantic. Let me move on to the next question. STM publishers can play a role also in helping to break down barriers across race in our own publishing processes and editorial boards. My question for John – how has Elsevier, in particular Cell Press, addressed this?

PHAM: I think before answering that question, I think that it's important to distinguish a couple of things. One is the degree to which we are including or excluding populations in our process and basically making sure that they're part of it. Then there's also the component of highlighting that they are part of the process and making their contributions visible.

We are working on both of those fronts right now. Before Black Lives Matter, we were working quite hard, and still are, on gender representation and geographical representation. Obviously, since our collective consciousnesses have been awakened this year, we're full steam ahead with wrapping in and making race and ethnicity as part of those efforts.

So in terms of changing our processes so that Black scientists and underrepresented minorities are included, first of all, we have to identify them. We have to make sure that we know who they are so that they can be included in the first place. I don't know if you know, but we published an editorial earlier this year titled "Science Has a Racism Problem" in which we highlighted our roles in this, how we have failed, and what we're going to be doing to change that.

A big part of that is the second component – highlighting, making visible the contributions of the people, and recognizing the contributions of Black and underrepresented scientists to the world-leading science that we publish. Those scientists are part of this, and if you only see names on a paper, it's very hard to know who those people are. So we've embarked a process to make those people more visible. We are going to be including a statement in papers where authors can talk about how they've thought about inclusion and diversity in designing and the authorship of their papers. There's that component of it.

But an important component is this, are you part of our process? Our main process is peer review. It's authoring papers. So we want to diversify our reviewer pool. We've been actively searching and adding people to that reviewer pool. I have to say we could use a lot of help from Elsevier. Right now, this is us editors – we spent Shut Down STEM Tuesday that followed the movement in June – we spent a lot of that day just identifying scientists in different fields that we could reach out to to recruit papers from, to include as peer reviewers.



Elsevier is a data and analytics company. We should have this data. We should be building tools to help editors find the reviewers, find the authors, and then put that information right in front of them when we have papers to peer review, so that we can make sure that our reviewers are diverse. So we can use a lot of help from Elsevier on that.

We're diversifying our reviewer pool. We did that with gender. After you identify the people and increase the pool, then you have to set benchmarks. You have to have goals that we have to meet. So we've done that with gender. We did that with our advisory boards. At Cell Press, we made a goal of a minimum of 30% of our boards would be women. At *Cell*, we've made our advisory board 50% women now. We should be doing the same things with the advisory board and with our reviewers. We should be doing the same thing considering race and ethnicity. What those numbers are, we have to figure them out. We have to think about the makeup of scientists in specific fields and thinking about what the benchmarks will be. But if we don't make the benchmarks, then it's hard to sort of hold ourselves accountable to making a change.

KOLMAN: You mentioned that you started with the editorial. How was it received, do you think?

PHAM: If you look on Twitter, overwhelmingly positive. (laughter) There's the obvious Twitter trolls that you're going to get. But the emails that I've received, that we've received – I've spent many, many hours, probably weeks' worth of time, talking with scientists who have reached out. We're about to publish a special issue at the end of October. A lot of the pieces in that issue have come about from the discussions that we've had in the wake of our editorial. It's been overwhelmingly positive.

There are people who raised some concerns about emphasis and whether or not we gave enough credit to existing efforts, whether or not we're too US-focused in that editorial. Those are points well taken. But still, we think that we did the right thing. We stand behind it. And so far, the response has been, again, overwhelmingly positive.

KOLMAN: Great. Thank you, John. And your call for more support from Elsevier is well noted. (laughter)

Let's move on to another question. Often when we talk about race and racism, not all our colleagues are at the same level, so to say. How do you bring colleagues kind of up to speed around issues around race and racism? Maybe let me start with Kevonne.



HOLLOWAY: Sure. So it starts with a conversation – really a courageous conversation, at that – which is simply a conversation that’s open and honest in a psychologically safe space. Psychological safety is the foundation to having productive conversations around diversity and inclusion, race and ethnicity. In a safe space, people are more willing to engage in conversation and share their experiences and exchange their viewpoints, which really allows for learning and leveling the landscape so everyone has a clear understanding as to one person’s experience versus another, as well as how to get up to speed on issues surrounding race and ethnicity. But it really requires – I can’t emphasize enough the psychological safety component to really engage in these courageous conversations.

KOLMAN: How would you describe psychological safety today? Is it there? Is it sufficient for the discussions? Or is there still room for improvement already on that side?

HOLLOWAY: I think Elsevier has done really a great job with training around psychological safety for people managers as well as individual contributors to help people understand what (a) psychological safety is and (b) how to build it within an A-to-B conversation or within a team dynamic. I feel that the organization has made great strides as it relates to creating psychological safety, and now the onus is on the people managers and individual contributors to engage in those courageous conversations.

KOLMAN: Great, thank you. Elliott, John, any views from your side?

PARRIS: I think my comment from having been part of the UK courageous conversations that we had after the US courageous conversations and also been a part of developing the Netherlands courageous conversations – I would agree that the psychological safety part is really important. I felt that the UK, we were less open at first, as I heard, in relation to other places. I’ve heard of very good things that have come out of the courageous conversations – not in terms of calls to action. That’s not what it’s about. As Kevonne said, it’s about making sure that everyone is open, and we can actually have these conversations, and making the invisible visible is the important point that I’ve heard a few times.

John, you were talking about making past authors’ work relevant. I spoke to Sharelle Barber recently. Something that she talked about – she’s a scholar activist based out of the US.

KOLMAN: Great, thank you. John, anything from your side?



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PHAM: Yeah, I think I would just add to that bit. I agree with Kevonne that it's up to the people managers and individuals, but it's also important that leadership be completely behind this. I do feel that Kumsal has been amazing.

KOLMAN: The Elsevier CEO, Kumsal Bayazit, yes.

PHAM: It's very clear that she cares about this. So then that sort of motivates and pushes us as leadership at Cell Press to say, OK, we need to have these conversations. We need to program them in. We need to not just have these conversations, but bring in and develop ways that we can train people to be thinking about unconscious bias and have that be company-wide and not just, hey, sign up to this thing that you can go to or not. We all need to have the conversations together. It needs to be required. And the importance of it needs to be conveyed at the highest levels.

So I agree with Kevonne. I think that Elsevier is doing an admirable job. We followed their guidelines on how to have these conversations when we were having them – how to make sure that people feel safe and free to share and not judged, that the conversations were going to stay in that room, that this was a place for us to share and learn and express. I think a lot came out of that because we knew how to have the conversations, because we had the guidance.

KOLMAN: Great, thanks. Chris, over to you. Any questions from your side?

KENNEALLY: Actually, I had been thinking about something when I've been listening to everyone discuss the issues, Michiel. That is that we're talking about leadership here, about initiatives that are coming from executives. These courageous conversations that we've been hearing about allow staff members to express their concerns, to talk about issues, maybe even suggest some ways of addressing them. So I don't know if Kevonne or Elliott or John could talk about some things that staff have told them about that surprised them or made them think about things in a different way that they could then approach this challenge.

PHAM: Maybe I'll just take a stab first. I could just tell you what happened at Cell Press. We had these conversations. I don't know if surprise – that's not the right word. I would say that I felt what came out was a lot of ideas, a ton of ideas. We had a number of these conversations broken up into groups so that people had time to speak. We collected all of the ideas, categorized them, prioritized them, and now we're appointing a position, a diversity and inclusion officer. That person is going to then be leading our efforts on these ideas that the staff came up with. That officer will then come up with a team that I think mostly should include our employees – the people who care about this, whose energy went into it. Harness



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that energy. Have those people use that energy to push us forward so that the things that we said we were going to do, we will actually do. That's what's happening at Cell Press.

HOLLOWAY: I think just building on that, outside of the ideas from the employees that came up during the courageous conversations, I think one of the a-ha moments for me was just people sharing their experiences and helping others understand so that we can all meet each other where we're at. That's really important when you start talking about race and ethnicity – being able to meet someone where they are at based on the experiences that they've had and the experiences that you've had and being able to bridge that gap.

So by sharing through courageous conversations, you get to a place where you may not have realized things like microaggressions or understood what microaggressions were, but through this process, your eyes are opened, and it's a learning experience. And when you learn, typically it's when you're outside of your comfort zone. By stepping outside your comfort zone and learning about race and ethnicity and how it impacts not only your colleagues, but people within your community and people at home in your own social circle, it makes you feel more empowered as an individual and armed with information so that you can actually help be a positive driver for change.

KOLMAN: That sounds perfect – a positive driver for change to kind of wrap up our first session here. I'll give the floor back to Chris.

KENNEALLY: Indeed. I do think that's a great way to end here, because the best place to start is to start, and that's what we are trying to do in this conversation. I want to thank our moderator and host, Michiel Kolman. This has been the first segment of a special two-part program that takes a fresh look at race and racism in the academic knowledge system.

Thank you as well to our Elsevier panelists – Kevonne Holloway, vice-president, education content, in the United States, Elliott Parris, manager of northern Europe chemistry solutions, in the UK, and John Pham, editor-in-chief of *Cell*, also based in the United States.

Thank you as well to Rachel Martin, access and policy communications manager with Elsevier in Amsterdam. Our program producer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. I'm Christopher Kenneally with Copyright Clearance Center. Thanks for joining us.

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