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.

For podcast release
Tuesday, October 6, 2020

KENNEALLY: This is 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.

From Elsevier employees in the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States, we are hearing of work 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 become more aware of racism's insidious impact and how to be active in efforts to accelerate equity, inclusion, and diversity.

Elsevier is a leading information analytics and academic publisher in the areas 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 achieving greater ethnic diversity.

In the first segment, the discussion focused on the internal challenges facing publishers and editors. The questions raised concerned policies around terminology to processes that govern selection of editorial boards.

In this concluding program, the discussion will consider how a publisher should respond to calls for change to eradicate racism in academic publishing and whether that change is happening fast enough.

Our program moderator is Michiel Kolman, Elsevier's senior vice president of information industry relations and academic ambassador. He joins me now from Amsterdam. Welcome back to the program, Michiel Kolman.

KOLMAN: Very happy to be back here, Chris.

KENNEALLY: Let's get this program started. Michiel, if you would, reacquaint our listeners and viewers with our guests today.

KOLMAN: Yeah, so welcome back to our panel. We have Kevonne Holloway, who is vice president for education content. Welcome back, Kevonne.

HOLLOWAY: Thank you very much.

KOLMAN: And then from London, we have Elliott Parris, who is manager in northern Europe of chemistry solutions. Welcome back, Elliott.

PARRIS: Thanks again, Michiel.

KOLMAN: And then we go back to the US, and there we have John Pham, who's editor-in-chief of *Cell*. Good to have you back, John.

PHAM: Thanks for including me.

KOLMAN: Great. Let me then immediately start with the first question. The BLM movement has largely been a grassroots effort. How can you harness the employee activism and enthusiasm to help publishers address race and racism? Maybe I can start with Elliott.

PARRIS: I suppose in my experiences from being in the UK and seeing what was unfolding in the US, I felt the need to speak up and try and do my part. So I was joining grassroots activist groups in the UK. Just for some context, we've seen the largest protests since the abolition of slavery in the UK, and it was interesting to be a part of that process and actually supporting some of those groups with some of the knowledge which Elsevier has disseminated.

But in doing that, I felt that Elsevier also needed to do what I saw people doing in the music industry, which was #TheShowMustBePaused, the hashtag that came out, which was giving people time to mourn, giving people time to reflect, but also giving people time to act as well. I think that was a very good first step which I saw that all Elsevier employees were allowed to use 16 hours of essentially pro bono time to work on this topic.

That was something which I wanted then to try and make the most of, with I suppose what's called an employee resource group at Elsevier. We decided to call

our group Embrace, so it's embracing the systemic racism within both the publishing industry, but in wider society as well. Also, just thinking about the fact that we are human, it talks about the need for allyship. It talks about empowerment. It talks about connection – so embracing our own vulnerabilities as well and speaking up when we don't think things are right.

In the UK, I've been trying where possible to champion antiracist efforts within Elsevier, but also to try and empower a lot of the groups which I've been engaging with outside of my job at Elsevier. And in time – it hasn't quite happened yet, but in time, I hope that the resources we have available at Elsevier can start supporting those groups, because when I talk to them, quite often they talk about a gap with data, a gap with research, particularly in relation to health disparities and then trying to figure out what are the community-led solutions that can actually start making change happen. Yeah, I think I'll stop there for now, maybe open up the floor a bit to our other panelists as well.

KOLMAN: Actually, this Zoom cast is well timed, because today, Embrace has rolled out across the UK and the Netherlands, right? So I saw messages sent to all employees to highlight Embrace. It's really well done, Elliott, in that sense. Over to others to chip in here – John?

PHAM: Maybe I'll just quickly add – I think that I have a perspective both as part of a leadership team at Cell Press and also somebody who cares about this and wants stuff to get done. A big piece of it obviously is giving our people a platform so that we can hear them and hear their ideas and consider them and to support those ideas and show that we're supporting them. That's harnessing the energy. It is about making sure that we're giving them opportunities to move forward with things that they care about.

Another thing that we can do is turn our attention towards those things. I don't know about the rest of the panelists in this group. I get a ton of emails, lots of things where I could be involved in – good things, but I have to choose which things I'm going to champion, which things I'm going to say, OK, I'm going to connect you with the right person who I think can help you move this forward. So I've been thinking more about, OK, this thing that comes up – I read about in a newsletter or something in company communications, and I can say, hey, I can help with this somehow. I'm going to reach out to that person and say, hey, that was great. Let me know if there's anything I can do, or something where I'm turning my attention towards that and helping them move whatever it is that they care about forward.

KOLMAN: John already mentioned the role of leadership in this discussion. What role is there? What specific actions can leaders take? Maybe, Kevonne, your perspective as a vice president?

HOLLOWAY: Sure. From a leadership perspective, creating change as it relates to race and ethnicity and the environment and company culture starts from the top down. It really starts with the CEO and cascades down through the various levels of management, all the way down to the individual contributor.

There are a number of ways that leadership can engage to create cultural change around race and ethnicity. We spoke about it in the first session around psychological safety training, unconscious bias training, having courageous conversations with employee groups.

Reverse mentoring is another great way to embed cultural change. It really builds awareness, and it supports the cultural change through race and ethnicity by having mentors and mentees who have had different experiences and in different places come together, so they learn from each other. Really, what it does is it builds and fosters change at a very micro level, which then you hope to expand to a macro level.

Additionally, you can have focus groups with employees and individual contributors and people managers as it relates to race and ethnicity to understand the pain points within your organization so that you can create a development plan or an action plan against those pain points and hold yourselves as leadership accountable. Because what employees really want to know is now that we have all been awakened to the problems around race and ethnicity, we want accountability and action to solve those problems. So they're looking to leadership to be not only engaged, but also to empower them to make changes and create that cultural shift.

PARRIS: I might just add to that, Michiel, because I've had a lot of help from Kevonne and also the African Ancestry Network, which Kevonne has represented as well. So I want to say thank you on air, but also, I agree that the mentorship and the support from, say, Kumsal emailing both my co-founder and myself as well has definitely motivated both of us and also the rest of our team as well.

KOLMAN: Kumsal being Elsevier's CEO here. Good, thank you. I hear great ideas. I hear the sense of activism. My question is as STM publishers, we can contribute to this change also externally, but are we doing enough? Can we do more? I want to kind of open the floor for that discussion. Are we moving fast enough, for instance? Who would like to take the floor first? John?

PHAM: I can just quickly say I think that – we're publishers, right? The biggest power that we have is our platform. We set many conversations. What we say, people listen to. And it's not just our voice. It's how we use our platform to share the voices of others. So I would say we're doing a lot now. We could do much, much more. What are we doing to seek out and to promote and highlight and make visible the voices right now that matter, that are going to continue this conversation and push it in the direction that it needs to go? We have our platforms. We should use them as much as we can.

HOLLOWAY: I would agree with that wholeheartedly. I also think we have a responsibility to ensure that the content that we disseminate, the data analytics that we have, the products that we serve our customers with are not only representative of diversity and inclusion – so that could be from images, to the review board being diverse, to the author pool being diverse, to the products showing that we take into account diversity and inclusion and that it matters. I think the other part of that is we are engaging a lot now around race and ethnicity and diversity and inclusion as a spectrum, but there's so much more that we could be doing, and I know that Elsevier is committed to taking those steps.

That's why I'm proud to be part of the Elsevier organization, because I know from the top down, from the CEO, from Kumsal down, there is a commitment to want to make change – and not only change, but sustainable positive change, which is really important. It's not about checking a couple things off a list and then moving on. It's about how we create a sustainable change that is reflective throughout time.

PARRIS: Yeah, I'm going to pitch in. I think the word sustainable there is important, and it's keeping up this momentum. Like John said, we have so many different things to focus on, whatever job we're in. But I think keeping on focusing on this is important, and I think people are starting to realize the reasons why it's important. Even just having a more inclusive and diverse workforce – we know the impact that that has on EBIT as well, like revenue. So I think it's becoming clear that this is something that we need to focus on for ourselves, but also for our business as well in the long term.

Like Kevonne, I am optimistic that we are doing a lot, and I'm really excited, actually, to see some of the things which we can start doing to support researchers wherever they have challenges with their work – with antiracist work, maybe they're giving recommendations that can be used for policy changes, but they're having challenges actually getting to that point where they get funding. These are people that might need some of the resources which we can provide, whether it's in

comms or marketing. I've heard some of those challenges from researchers recently.

And again, coming back to the grassroots activist groups, we need to stay engaged with them to hear what are the challenges that they're having, and how can we support them? How can we connect them with the research that is there and that we are giving to the world?

KOLMAN: Chris, any questions from your side?

KENNEALLY: Actually, I was thinking, Michiel, as I was listening to you and the panelists talk, that this drive for change and the need to make it sustainable is one that is really demanding. We live in a time – 2020 has been such a year, right? So many different things – the pandemic, the attention drawn again to racism by the Black Lives Matter movement, by the attention given to police killings of Black men and women in the United States and how that sort of jumped from our borders to the rest of the world. It has been, I think, for a lot of people difficult to bear. Yet what I'm hearing from the panelists is a sense of optimism, a sense of hope. So maybe a good way to end our discussion is to ask them, where does that optimism come from? Is there something you can point to, your own personal experience or professional experience, that helps you continue this work every day? Kevonne?

HOLLOWAY: Sure. I'm involved in Elsevier with a race and ethnicity task force, and as a part of that task force, one of the many things we're doing is looking at ways we can move the needle both internally within the organization and externally within the communities that we serve and the customers that we serve as well. That task force was recently stood up, and as a part of that, it provides me with the hope that we are going to be able to make positive sustainable change, and that it's not just a fleeting movement. That's where my hope comes from.

KENNEALLY: I wonder, John, if you have some thoughts about where your optimism, your sense of a bright future, comes from. Because it seemed to me you really did feel that a change is happening.

PHAM: I would say a couple of things. One is that as I said before, we've been hearing a lot from our communities, from Black scientists. There's been a lot of pain and frustration and isolation in that correspondence, but also from them hope and optimism and that this is the time. This is the time where things are going to happen. And they need us in order for that to happen. So my optimism comes from that correspondence.

Also, we closed our editorial, "Science Has a Racism Problem," with a few sentences. Science has a racism problem. Scientists are problem-solvers. Let's get to it. There are problems here. It's not like we are looking around, trying to figure out what the problems to solve are. They're right there in front of us. We just have to put in the work.

KENNEALLY: I guess finally, then, Elliott, what's your approach to solving problems? This is a big problem, but perhaps the best way to approach it is to break it down. Has there been a moment when there's been a way that you've sort of addressed a smaller problem that you realized can build from there?

PARRIS: I feel like everything that's been happening the past two months as far as this employee resource group, Embrace, has been challenging. It's all been new for me personally. The past three or four months have been particularly challenging. I'm sure everyone else would say the same on the panel and outside of this panel as well.

One specific thing I've found pretty challenging is trying to set up my own panel discussion. And one thing that's given me optimism is just in talking to people and understanding what goals they have, there's always intersection with the goals that we have as well. Ultimately, there are experts who have done this research. To John's point, we know that the problems are there. It's just then trying to connect them with the resources that are available if people want to make a change happen.

And I'm seeing it within colleagues at Elsevier. There are over 100 people actively engaged in our group now on Microsoft Teams – friends, not only people of color, but importantly, people who are not of color as well. I think that, to me, is the things that's given me optimism – that people are always talking about this. And sometimes, it gets a bit overbearing, some of the conversations that you have. But ultimately, change isn't easy. That's what's keeping me going. Even though it's challenging, you just have to keep pushing through.

I have a painting of Malcolm X on my wall – by any means necessary. I literally wake up every day looking at that. That gives me motivation to keep on going.

KENNEALLY: I like the point, Elliott, about relying on colleagues. That seems to me to be a great way to end this discussion, because we can't do this alone. We need each other. And I appreciate the chance to hear from all of you today about addressing these problems.

I want to thank especially our moderator, Michiel Kolman, who's the senior vice president at Elsevier. Michiel, wonderful job. Thank you so much.

KOLMAN: Thank you. It was great to do this. I was honored to be involved here.

KENNEALLY: This has been the second segment of a special two-part program that takes a fresh look at race and racism in the academic knowledge system. Thank you again to our Elsevier panelists – Kevonne Holloway, vice president, education content, in the United States, Elliott Parris, manager of northern Europe chemistry solutions, based in the United Kingdom, and John Pham, editor-in-chief of *Cell*, also based in the United States.

Thanks 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.

END OF FILE