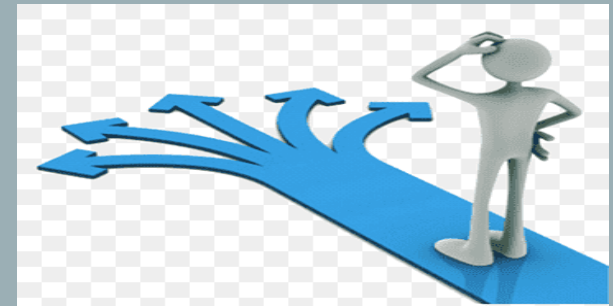


**CHOOSING THE 'RIGHT' JOURNAL: THE
PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICES OF PANDEMIC-ERA
EARLY CAREER RESEARCHERS**

David Nicholas and Blanca Rodríguez Bravo

Harbingers-2 research project

<http://ciber-research.com/harbingers-2/>)



THE HARBINGERS-2 PROJECT

Harbingers-2 project an international, longitudinal exploration of work lives and scholarly communication practices of pandemic-era sciences and social sciences Early Career Researchers (ECRs).

Project, funded by A.P. Sloan Foundation, is a two-year extension (2020-2022) to Harbingers-1, a four-year long (2016–19) research into ECRs' acting as change agents, funded by the UK Publishing Research Consortium (PRC).

- **TAKE AWAY – NEVER KNOWN SO MUCH ABOUT JUNIOR RESEARCHERS – THE BIGGEST COMMUNITY OF RESEARCHERS**

SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

Definition of ECRs: Not older than 40, doctorate holders/doctoral students, currently/in the past in a research position, but not in established or tenured positions: students, postdocs, research assistants/fellows and assistant professors.

Procedure: 177 ECRs interviewed (60 Qs) every 6 months for 2 years (3 rounds). Interviews conducted via Zoom, in local language, recorded & translated into English. ROUND 1 REPORTED HERE

Disciplines: ECRs from the all the science and social science disciplines.

Countries: China, France, Poland, Malaysia, Spain, Russia, UK and US.

Topics: Work life, reputation, scholarly comms and impact of pandemic.

FINDINGS REPORTED HERE

Focus on one *very* important aspect of study: publishing papers.

Specifically, perceptions and practices of pandemic-era ECRs when choosing most appropriate journal for publishing their research.

Data obtained from the replies to two questions:

- 1) When choosing a journal to submit to, which factors rate most highly?
- 2) Is the pandemic likely to change relative ratings?

PUBLISHING PAPERS: A SCHOLARLY PULSE POINT

- **All-important topic:** Consensus that it is research of high quality and impact, published in prestigious journals, which is rewarded. It is the litmus test of reputation, and reputation everything for junior researchers aspiring for promotion and tenure.
- If change happens here it is truly significant – first crack in the scholarly wall. A scholarly **pulse point**.
- Two-pronged challenge to traditional ways of deciding on ‘right’ journal:
 - 1) **Generational change** (Millennials)
 - 2) **The pandemic.**

DECIDING ON THE 'RIGHT' JOURNAL

1) **Generational** change: Harbingers-1 chronicled a *slowly* changing face of scholarly comms, as a result of millennial beliefs, such as transparency and openness. Is this continuing and in respect to publishing research?

2) **Pandemic** change: electric shot treatment traditional system needs? In a crisis, will conservativeness or innovation become overriding consideration? Are pandemic-incurred practices of rapid dissemination (pre-prints, blogs, fast-track peer review) and greater outreach first indicators of system-wide change?

So, what factors do ECRs take into account when deciding on 'right' journal? Do choices differ according to nationality, discipline, status, gender and age? Have choices changed over time and/or as the result of the pandemic?

FACTORS INVOLVED IN PUBLISHING CHOICES: PRIOR EVIDENCE

Many factors involved in decision where to publish papers and they overlap. Thus, Harbingers-1 found 17 factors (in order of importance):

- **1.** Indexed in WoS/Scopus; **2.** High impact factor; **3.** Relevant to field; **4.** Prestigious; **5.** Audience; **6.** Standards of peer review; **7.** Fast processing; **8.** Trusted/used in past; **9.** Interdisciplinary; **10.** Approved by university/government; **11.** OA; **12.** No charges (APCs); **13.** Easier to get into; **14.** Innovative features; **15.** Practices open peer review; **16.** Has hard copy and online variants; **17.** Editor or editorial board.
- Indexation, a high IF, prestige and, arguably, even high peer review proxies for best/top journal.

SETTING OUT TO UPDATE THE PICTURE OF PUBLISHING CHOICES

Prior understandings made possible a more direct and informed approach to exploration of topic: taking the most important factors identified in Harbingers-1 as prompts for more direct questioning.

One new factor added – geographical location, in view of (1) the possibly greater trans-nationalisation of research activity aimed at combatting the virus; (2) predatory publishing being associated with developing countries.

Initially did not prompt for indexation, because CVs showed that virtually all ECRs had published in WoS/Scopus journals (and we had JIF), but added to list when volunteered by interviewees.

TOEING THE LINE -PROBLEM?

- ECRs, as junior researchers working in a team, do not make all of the publishing decisions, indeed, they have to fit in with the wishes of others.
- However, asked to give personal opinion, and, with interviews conducted in a trusting atmosphere, no reason to doubt them.
- Many interviewees in a position to assert their views: know from CVs that a good number are lead authors and if they are not, as members of often small teams, opinions would have been heard.

WHICH FACTORS RATE MOST HIGHLY WHEN CHOOSING A JOURNAL? BIG PICTURE

FACTOR	COUNTRY									All (R2)
	(weighted average. 0 = least important; 5 = most important)									
	China	France	Malaysia	Poland	Russia	Spain	UK	US	All	
a) High impact factor journal (H1 =2)	4.2	4.0	4.4	4.3	4.2	4.7	3.7	4.2	4.2	4.1
b) Prestige (H1 =4)	4.8	4.2	4.5	4.0	4.6	4.6	4.2	4.3	4.4	4.4
c) Appropriateness of audience (H1 =5)	4.5	3.4	4.2	3.6	3.7	3.5	4.3	4.6	4.0	4.1
d) High standards of peer review (H1 =6)	3.8	3.1	3.8	3.6	4.1	2.7	3.3	4.1	3.5	3.3
e) Speed from submission to publication (H1 =7)	3.3	2.6	4.7	4.2	3.9	2.9	2.6	3.1	3.4	3.2
f) Open access (H1 =11)	2.0	2.8	4.3	3.5	3.2	2.1	3.2	2.9	2.9	3.0
g) Geographical location	0.5	0.9	2.6	2.1	1.8	1.1	0.6	1.7	1.4	1.6
h) Where indexed (H1 =1)	1.0	3.7	4.9	4.1	0.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.7	3.6

THE COMMON DENOMINATOR: SEEKING TO PUBLISH IN THE 'BEST' JOURNALS

- **Prestige** most important factor (4.4), particularly for China (4.8) and Russia (4.6).
- **High IF** most important factor for Spain (4.7).
- **Appropriateness of audience** for UK (4.3) and US (4.6)
- Malaysia an outlier, with '**where indexed**' first (4.9)
- Other than audience (a 'must', for no point reporting to audience that has no familiarity/interest in topic), factors accorded most importance for deciding where to publish have **one common denominator: the overarching objective of publishing in 'best' journals.**
- 'Best' stems from reason for being thought to **reflect quality**: 1) mandate, which renders a factor normative and rewardable (**where indexed**); 2) 'everyone just knows' (**prestige**); 3) a commonly accepted 'market' metric (**impact factor**); 4) the competitive challenge of **peer review** – 'am I good enough to pass this test?'

IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON JOURNAL CHOICE

- ECRs felt pandemic would make no difference, with 158 (89%) saying so. Just 10 (6%) thought there would be change and 8 (5%) did not know.
- Main reason: ECRs take their cue from the fact that university and grant funders' publishing requirements have not changed: *I have no problem channelling my work in any criteria mentioned, but I think when it comes to publishing, then you follow your mind, you go target your submissions to where your university wants you to publish (Malaysian, physics).*
- Spain (96%) the most adamant there would be no change.
- Only in cases of Russia (77%) and China (79%) was there any real doubt.

'POSSIBLE' CHANGES IN DOWN THE LINE BROUGHT ABOUT BY PANDEMIC

- Pandemic might make **geographical location even less important**, because *everything's going to be virtual* (US mathematical scientist).
- **Greater interest in audience** brought on by pandemic outreach activities.
- **Speed of publications** most likely to become more important: *As a result of the pandemic... medical journals will have priorities in the speed of publication...very important in order to quickly understand how to treat patients, especially patients with coronavirus* (Russian medical ECR).
- Different aspect of impact on speed of publication is **resubmitting articles may be delayed**: *...I'll submit stuff to top tier journals, fully expecting it to be rejected pretty quickly, and they're not... everybody is so backed up... [but] then you don't have an opportunity to get it out again as quickly as normally* (US medical scientist).

FOCUS ON GREATER SPEED OF PUBLICATION

Might have thought that increased speed of publication would attract greater interest because:

- Where top journals are concerned, slowness of handling/deliberation expected and a price readily paid, as long as get in: *...even if Nature said it takes them two years to publish a paper that wouldn't deter me from submitting, probably* (US life scientist).
- Of trust issues. For example, a US medical scientist may express a prevailing opinion when says: *...I don't believe them when they say it takes a certain amount of time. I just don't trust that. Honestly, as long as it gets published sometime, it's not that important to me.* Also, wary of too speedy a process, which may be indicative of predatory publishing?

DISCIPLINARY DIVERSITY

- A constancy of views across the various disciplines when comes to choosing a journal, despite the long-established diversity among disciplinary areas, which dictates very different research-practices.
- Perhaps unsurprisingly given the aim of publishing being the same for all scholarly authors, regardless of discipline – the building up of their record of achievements and thereby the enhancing of their reputation – choosing the ‘right’ journal is contingent on the factors that can best serve this purpose.
- Still, environmental sciences (4.6) rate prestige most highly, physics (4.6) impact factor and life sciences (4.3) an appropriate audience.

AGE-RELATED DIVERSITY

- No significant difference between oldest/youngest (ranging from mid-twenties to early forties). All ECRs on the 'rocky road' to becoming established.
- One baffling finding: given Millennials' reported open and transparent beliefs, might have expected younger end of the ECR age spectrum to favour OA more, but not the case. Indeed, youngest are marginally less likely to do so.
- Possible explanation: as pioneers of OA movement, older ECRs the ones who may be more inclined and/or in a better position to continue promoting, establishing and funding open access publishing. *I would like there to be an opportunity for the scholarly community to move to more open access journals... [but] I think actually the opportunity is more for the older scholars. I think they have more freedom and clout, so they are the ones who have the real potential to move to open access journals (US hard social scientist).*

GENDER-ASSOCIATED DIVERSITY

- Women rank peer review slightly lower than men and men rate open access a bit higher, but differences are near 'noise' level. Need more investigation.
- Explanation for gender similarity may be that both men and women striving to get to similar places in life, and so follow the guidance that will get them there. It's like running a marathon – it doesn't matter who you are, there is only one way to get to the finish line.

CONCLUSIONS – EARLY DAYS

- **Few big cracks in the scholarly edifice** – although small, incremental increases in ratings for audience, speed and open access. **Might auger changes down the line**, probably driven by generational and pandemic factors.
- **Pandemic made only a little difference** to majority of ECRs when comes to choosing ‘right’ journal. But an identifiable press for faster submission, brought on by pandemic, although ECRs, possibly wary of predatory publishing, suspicious about too speedy publication process.
- Greater efforts made during pandemic to make papers more openly available might be raising profile & benefits of OA publishing, but no uptick yet.
- Greater interest in audience because of importance of outreach activities, demonstrated only visibly by the pandemic.