

Keynote: When Good Intentions Just Aren't Enough: Engaging Diverse Communities as Partners in Knowledge

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A fundamental aspect of the scientific enterprise is that it begins with a question about our world and the way it works. What comes next is extensive, laborious research that may or may not yield satisfactory answers, and there is always more work to be done to convert newly acquired knowledge into progress. The same can be said about endeavors to implement principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) within the scholarly publishing industry. In her keynote address at the CSE 2023 Annual Meeting in Toronto, Dr Alpha Abebe accentuated the importance of weathering and even embracing the inherent challenges that come with efforts to bring about systemic and sustainable change. And—not unlike the scientific enterprise—one of those challenges is asking ourselves: Are we asking the right questions in the first place?

A community practitioner and community engagement researcher, Abebe began by noting her appreciation of the theme of the CSE meeting, “Reflecting on Community: Opening Borders in Scholarly Publishing,” and went on to pose a series of questions that laid bare both the opportunities and the problems that accompany efforts to dismantle barriers within the scholarly publishing industry. Citing a formative experience during her postgraduate studies that shifted her perception of the concepts of data and knowledge, she posited that alternative voices, nonscholarly material, and lived experience are in fact forms of information that can make science more innovative, more rigorous, and more reflective of the world at large. Furthermore, the recent global reckoning with systemic inequities has opened the floodgates for important—albeit difficult—conversations about DEI-inspired paradigm shifts and has generated a wave of unprecedented social action on multiple levels. However, fatigue is setting in; much of

the initial, well-intentioned zeal is fading and/or ringing hollow, and the political pendulum is beginning to swing in the other direction.

It was here that Abebe reiterated the crux of her talk: Good intentions will only take us so far. If community engagement efforts are treated as nothing more than a moral imperative and are limited to performative action and abstract proselytization, they will wash away with the shifting societal tides. To that end, Abebe highlighted 4 critical questions that the scholarly publishing community should ask itself.

1. How Do We Define Knowledge?

In our efforts to define knowledge as it pertains to scholarly publishing, Abebe proposed that the academic and editorial publishing process is not a “value-neutral enterprise.” While stating that knowledge production is an exercise of power, she also noted that French philosopher Michel Foucault upended the traditional notions of power:

We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it “excludes,” it “represses,” it “censors,” it “abstracts,” it “masks,” it “conceals.” In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production.¹

As we reflect on our understanding of knowledge, Abebe said, it’s important to consistently acknowledge the power being exercised in editorial decision-making processes to

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engender a sustainable sense of accountability and stay attentive to our responsibilities. Furthermore, reflections on knowledge should include reflections on systemic industry hierarchies, which have historically placed particular voices, histories, and forms of knowledge along a spectrum of legitimacy. As one example, Abebe noted that while lived experience is often leveraged as data to substantiate empirical projects, it is rarely acknowledged as a viable form of expertise or theoretical framework. There are myriad ways in which people make sense of their world, so it's insufficient to simply incorporate new perspectives into existing knowledge structures—it's important to first be curious about what other forms of knowledge may exist, then seek them out.

2. Why Do We Seek to Engage New and Diverse Communities?

Abebe has participated extensively in community engagement activities with a wide range of stakeholders over the years. When the group being engaged is from a historically marginalized community, she said, there is often a sense of surprise from the facilitators when an activity actually yields insightful results. Abebe finds this reaction telling. To her, it reveals that the bar is often set very low, and that DEI-related projects are often undertaken purely for their own sake and not necessarily because the organizers are expecting tangible improvements as an outcome.

Honest conversation is paramount, and the right questions need to be asked at the outset. Do we truly feel there is a gap to be filled? Why are we motivated to open our borders and hear from new voices? Nurturing a culture of excitement about the prospective skills and expertise offered by new and diverse communities can fundamentally change an institution's approach and ultimately lead to meaningful outcomes. Superficial engagement is at best counterproductive, Abebe said—at worst, it can be damaging for the communities with whom you're engaging. True progress can be made only when we recognize that community engagement activities have the very real potential to make substantial and sustainable impacts on our work, our institutions, and our world.

3. Who Are We Trying to Engage, and How?

Building bridges with groups that have been systematically excluded takes time, resources, and patience—and to complicate matters, Abebe noted, the very hierarchies we are attempting to dismantle via our engagement with diverse communities often exist within those communities. Once again, a question is key: Are we ensuring that our efforts are not reinforcing the status quo and amplifying dominant and narrow perspectives? Assessing the power

dynamics and representational issues within the community you hope to engage is arduous work—and there are multiple pitfalls to avoid.

First, it's very easy—but also lazy, Abebe submitted—to write off a community's lack of engagement as a deficit within that community. "We have a great initiative, they're just not coming" or "They just don't understand the value of this work" are common responses that dismiss and distract from the deficits within our own systems. Second, the events of the last few years have led to physical and emotional fatigue among many people, hence there is considerable opportunity cost associated with taking on new tasks and commitments; these costs should be taken seriously and may require additional resources to mitigate them. Third, the group being engaged should be asked to help set the agenda. No matter how well-intentioned an initiative is, a group is less likely to simply hop on board if they haven't been involved in developing it—and engaging a group early on is an opportunity for relationship building and developing a sense of ownership of that initiative. Finally, it's critical to look at the full picture. If a group is not participating in an engagement effort, look further upstream. If you feel you've done good work but are struggling to see the sustainable impact, look further down the pipeline to try to understand what's happening on the other end.

4. What Do We Stand to Gain and Lose from This Work?

Abebe issued her final question with an alert: The tide is shifting. Communities are redefining the terms of engagement and are rethinking traditional knowledge systems. Younger people, in particular, have spent their formative years in an age of social reckoning and are impatient with the status quo. Additionally, the definitions of rigor are being reshaped to include a wider range of perspectives and analyses; people are asking important questions about what data looks like, what science looks like, and what knowledge looks like. If the scholarly publishing community refrains from asking some of these same questions, Abebe insisted, there is much to lose—but there is much to be gained by asking the same questions within our institutions and remaining open to new voices, new perspectives, and new knowledge systems.

Yet such gains come at a cost. Authentic community engagement is grueling work, and Abebe stressed that discomfort is a critical component of the process. To illustrate this, she asked audience members to cross their arms, knowing that most would subconsciously place the dominant arm on top. She then asked that they cross their arms again, but to intentionally place the nondominant arm on top. The hesitation and awkwardness that ensued emulated the process of community engagement, Abebe

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said; critical thinking often requires that we put ourselves in uncomfortable positions, and the act of power redistribution means that someone, somewhere is losing a certain amount of power—a process that is rarely if ever comfortable.

Abebe closed with a quote—and a compelling concept—from Sherene Razack:

Yet our structural in-betweenness also generates a deep commitment to being critically reflexive. We are committed to navigating what we already know to be a trap. Unwilling to believe that we are, as Malcom X insisted, either part of the problem or the solution, we embrace this in-betweenness where things can feel temporarily ethical, even as we never stop worrying that there is no pure ethical dwelling place.²

Noting that community engagement—like scientific research—often feels like 2 steps forward followed by 1

step back, Abebe praised the nuance of this quote, which suggests that although there is no destination of ethical purity that can ever be reached, any efforts to reach it are far from futile. Referring to a “fundamental asymmetry” that exists in any system of knowledge production, she implored her audience to embrace Razack’s concept of ethical “in-betweenness”—because what can often seem ineffectual in fact has intrinsic value that should propel us forward in our efforts to better our institutions, ourselves, and our world.

References and Links

1. Foucault M. *Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison*. London: Penguin; 1975.
2. Razack SH. Afterword: researchers of good will. In: Macías T, editor. *Unravelling research: the ethics and politics of research in the social sciences*. Fernwood Publishing; 2022. p. 211–219.



Council of
Science Editors

Call for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Scholarly Resources

CSE has launched a repository of journal and organizational statements related to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Many journals have begun working to improve editorial board diversity, evaluate peer review processes for implicit bias, revise guidelines for authors, or develop training opportunities, while others are struggling with where to start.

Has your journal or organization issued a statement about policies and practices related to diversity, equity, and inclusion? Please consider sharing your efforts with our community by completing the [DEI Resources Submission Form](#) on the CSE homepage under “Resources.”

Submitted resources will be publicly available on the CSE website.

