Lightning Rods in Scholarly Publishing

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Several years ago, I attended one of my first scholarly publishing conferences. The theme of that event was diversity. I remember sitting in a ballroom in a session where the women vastly outnumbered the men. It was inspiring to witness the passion with which attendees stood up and spoke, and the tremendous support that they received. I, a Black man, was one of hundreds of people adding my claps to a thunderous chorus of applause that seemed to shake the building. I remember scanning the room and noticing that, for a conference focused on diversity, I could count the people of color on one hand scattered around distant corners of the room. As the session seemed to be dying down, I realized that we were only talking about gender diversity, excluding colleagues who were not white. Nobody mentioned the lack of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) in scholarly publishing or even at the conference. I could feel myself slowly shrinking and fading into the shadows. The moment had passed, I didn’t matter, and nobody cared.

Why didn’t I speak up for myself? In that moment, there were several reasons why I chose not to raise my hand or walk up to a microphone and make a legitimate case for the lack of racial diversity.

1. I did not want to detract from the important movement toward gender equity in an industry I was still relatively new to.
2. I did not feel comfortable representing the half dozen or so people of color in the room to the hundreds of others that may not understand, agree with, support, or identify with my concerns.
3. No one seemed to notice what was so obvious to me, which meant I was the one that was different.
4. Maybe there was no place for me in scholarly publishing.

Reflecting on these points, I think it’s important to consider how restricting these reasons have been and how damaging they are to scholarly publishing. They become paralyzing to those of us who have a voice and want to contribute, but don’t feel valued by colleagues or recognized by industry leaders as someone that matters.

Today, the movement toward improving racial equity and evolving scholarly publishing into a more diverse industry has become a leading priority for many organizations. The horrors of systemic racism and police brutality toward BIPOC community members captured on video have been an introduction to many white colleagues of the discrimination they may have never witnessed firsthand. Or, it has been a realization of how intense the dark clouds of white supremacy are that continue to rain down on us all. There are many colleagues in positions of power, like those that formed the Coalition for Diversity & Inclusion in Scholarly Communications (C4DISC), that have used their influence and resources to create sustainable, equitable, professional environments that would encourage those professionals who once faded into the shadows to proudly shine and speak up.

The introduction to the Antiracism Toolkit for Allies, a project led by the Toolkits for Equity group (now a part of C4DISC), states that “building equity cannot be a ‘top-down’ or even ‘bottom-up’ process but must be both, as well as something that happens on an individual, interpersonal, and community level.” The free resource identifies the following five steps to becoming an ally:

1. Become conscious of white advantage;
2. Listen to BIPOC without judgment and/or defensiveness;
3. Move out of social segregation and develop truth-telling relationships of accountability with diverse groups of people;
4. Take action to interrupt racism and white advantage at all levels;
5. Create work communities where everyone thrives.

I’ve viewed the path to allyship, where an individual with advantage, privilege, power, or influence actively decides to support, protect, and defend the value of those belonging to BIPOC communities, as a very personal journey that one chooses to embark upon and is determined by their own level of commitment. There are stages that begin with that
first “Aha Moment” and lead toward Dr. Martin Luther King Jr’s “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” That introspection may spark a curiosity about the Anti-racism Toolkit for Allies and inspire you to share it with your human resources department or other colleagues. An ally will defend BIPOCs from inappropriate conduct, various forms of aggressions, discrimination, and biases in a room where there are no BIPOCs. An ally understands that “not being a racist” is not enough and is actively working toward being antiracist, building trust, and engaging in uncomfortable conversations that challenge the lack of diversity.

In my opinion, the ultimate level of support resides in the term “Conductor.” According to Eastern Illinois University’s “Underground Railroad: A Path to Freedom,” Conductors helped fugitive slaves by “providing them with safe passage to and from stations.” Conductors comprised people from different races, professions, and economic statuses. The dictionary definition of conductor includes words and phrases like “leader,” “guide,” “director,” and “one who is in charge of passengers.”

My favorite definition of “conductor,” according to dictionary.com, is “lightning rod.” Following the breadcrumbs, a lightning rod is defined as “a person or thing that attracts and absorbs powerful and especially negative or hostile feelings, opinions, etc., thereby diverting such feelings from other targets.”

Lightning rods are those individuals that are actively driving institutional change, using their privilege, power, or position to create equity. Like Conductors along the Underground Railroad, they provide welcoming professional cultures, guiding the conversations to promote equity and expand participation. I’m inspired by the many lightning rods across the scholarly publishing industry sparking social evolution. Their energy helps make scholarly publishing a safer place that will attract the diverse representation of BIPOCs we so desperately need. If you are on your journey of allyship, I encourage you to connect your energy to members of marginalized communities, develop a charge, and let the lightning strike.

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