RECONCEPTUALISING AUDIENCE IN ACADEMIC SCHOLARSHIP: NAVIGATING THE COMPLEXITIES OF SCHOLARLY COMMUNICATION AND INTENDED READERSHIP

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the idea of the intended audience in academic writing. It explores the various layers of readership involved in creating scholarly work. The paper demonstrates that academic authors frequently envision their audience as peers in their field. At the same time, they must deal with institutional expectations, policy implications, and the need for public engagement. Drawing on theories from the sociology of knowledge and scholarly communication, the study challenges the choices scholars make regarding their audience. It also examines how these choices influence the production, presentation, and reception of knowledge. By reviewing existing literature, this paper highlights the challenges of writing for peers, fulfilling institutional performance goals, and reaching a broader audience. The study critically analyses how neoliberal pressures are changing academic output. This matter focuses on impact metrics and the push for open-access publishing. Additionally, it considers how digital platforms and decolonial approaches are broadening and diversifying scholarly audiences.

Keywords: academic writing, audience, scholarly communication, public scholarship, epistemology

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Academic writing is often seen as a closed-off activity that mainly serves peers within specific fields (Anderson & McDougall, 2015; Hyland, 2019; Lillis, 2001; Macdonald, 1994; Swales, 1990). Hyland assesses how academic writing often adheres to strict disciplinary norms, limiting accessibility to broader audiences. Lillis's (2001) book reviews how institutional norms of academic writing can be exclusionary and reinforce power structures. Macdonald (1994) illustrates how academic writing tends to favour peer-to-peer communication over public engagement. Swales (1990) introduces the concept of "discourse communities," showing how academic texts are tailored to insiders rather than the public. There is a convergence of views that traditional academic writing excludes broader audiences, and how digital modes may bridge this gap (Anderson & McDougall, 2015). However, the question of who scholars write for is more complex and requires critical examination. Scholars have to consider various audiences, including colleagues, institutional reviewers, policymakers, and the general public. Each audience has different expectations, knowledge levels, and criteria that impact the content, style, structure, and goals of scholarly texts.

The growth of open-access publishing and the rise of public scholarship add further layers to this issue, necessitating a reevaluation of traditional notions of the audience. Historically, academic writing has been oriented toward specialist readerships, with peer-reviewed journals serving as gatekeepers to scholarly legitimacy (Hyland, 2019; Swales, 1990). However, the open-access movement challenges this exclusivity by making research freely available to the public, thus broadening the potential audience far beyond disciplinary boundaries (Suber, 2012). This shift invites academics to reconsider not only who they are writing for, but also how they communicate complex ideas to readers who may lack formal training in the field (Lillis, 2001).

Simultaneously, the emergence of public scholarship, which includes blogs, op-eds, podcasts, social media threads, and community-engaged research, positions scholars as contributors to broader societal discourse rather than solely academic conversations (Anderson & McDougall, 2015; Fitzpatrick, 2019). As a result, the conventions of academic writing are increasingly questioned for their opacity, jargon, and lack of accessibility (Bourdieu, 1988; Macdonald, 1994). Scholars are now confronted with the challenge of balancing intellectual rigour with clarity and public relevance, particularly when engaging multiple audiences with diverse backgrounds, interests, and expectations (Boyer, 1996; Nichols, 2017; Small, 2013).

Consequently, these developments necessitate a critical reassessment of traditional academic norms and communicative practices. The very definition of "audience" in academic work is evolving, no longer confined to institutional peers but extending to policymakers, practitioners, students, activists, and the general public (Fitzpatrick, 2019; Suber, 2012). This pluralisation of the academic audience requires more inclusive writing practices and fosters a renewed commitment to knowledge dissemination as a civic responsibility, not merely a disciplinary obligation (Lillis, 2001; Hyland, 2019). This paper addresses the central question: Who is the intended audience for scholars? It draws on critical literature to explore how audience considerations influence the creation, presentation, and purpose of scholarly knowledge. The current paper also looks at the ethical and political implications of writing within and outside the academic world.

The connection between the writer and their intended audience plays a crucial role in the creation of academic knowledge (Bazerman, 1988; Hyland, 2005; Ivanič, 1998; Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis, 2001; Swales, 1990; Thompson, 2001). Bazerman (1988) articulates how genre and audience conventions in scientific writing shape the presentation and interpretation of knowledge. Academic norms, such as citing sources, being transparent about methods, and using specialised language, are influenced by who the writer thinks will be reading their work. When scholars present arguments, they implicitly choose which fields, discussions, and practitioners to reference and engage with. For example, the choice of citation style indicates whether the writer is addressing neo-Marxist economists or environmental historians. The choice of writing style, be it analytical, narrative, or argumentative, depends on the writer's view of the audience's expected knowledge and beliefs. These decisions, even if unspoken, shape the entire text and can either engage or alienate potential readers beyond the immediate circle of conversation. The interaction between the audience and the text is not incidental; it is essential to the text's credibility and its ability to reach a broader audience.

However, the rise of open-access options and public scholarship alters earlier understandings of the audience. Open repositories, university presses, and policy briefs now present the same peer-reviewed articles and books not merely as isolated academic achievements visible only to a promotion committee, but as materials readily available in the public domain (Suber, 2012). Policymakers, journalists, and the public can access this work, which is often removed from its original context of disciplinary conventions and peer review (Fitzpatrick, 2019). As a result, scholars are increasingly held accountable to readers who are no longer a homogeneous group of academic peers but include diverse publics with varied expectations (Lillis, 2001; Hyland, 2019). The ethical imperatives for equitable access and public accountability compel scholars to clarify not only what they know, but also for whom this knowledge is intended and what impact it is meant to have (Anderson & McDougall, 2015; Macdonald, 1994).

This paper reviews both foundational and modern critiques of the audience in the social and literary studies of knowledge production, examining how various disciplines reshape, broaden, or challenge the concept of the scholarly audience. The second section examines several real-world cases, open-access studies in epidemiology, collaboratively edited volumes, and humanities research relevant to policy, illustrating how different institutional, ethical, and political needs shape the writer-audience relationship. Ultimately, the conclusion synthesises these insights to propose a model of audience pluralism. This model acknowledges the interconnectedness of multiple audiences that scholars engage with, while resisting the urge to rank them based on perceived importance.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

The discussion around the intended audience in academic writing is complex and continues to change. Hyland (2009) suggests that academic texts are created with readers in mind, highlighting the interactive aspect of scholarly communication. In this perspective, the audience is not a fixed group; instead, it is shaped by disciplinary norms and reader expectations. Hyland emphasises the interactive nature of academic writing, where scholars carefully create texts expecting their peers to interpret, critique, and engage with them. This interaction highlights the performative aspect of scholarly discourse, where the writer's credibility is closely tied to the audience they expect to engage with.

Building on these ideas, Bazerman (1988) describes writing as a social act that exists within communities of practice. He sees academic texts not just as containers of information, but also as tools that reinforce or challenge existing ways of knowing. He argues that the audience plays a crucial role in creating meaning, as readers bring their assumptions, values, and ways of interpreting the text. This view challenges the notion of the independent scholar and situates writing within broader institutional and social contexts. The audience influences not only the visible aspects of the text, such as vocabulary and citation styles, but also its deeper perspectives and the power dynamics of knowledge it supports or challenges.

Second-generation studies have further developed these ideas by looking at the small processes that shape writer-reader interactions. For example, Swales (1990) and later Swales and Feak (2004) claim that scholars negotiate audience expectations through genre conventions and rhetorical strategies. Their work on genre analysis demonstrates how disciplinary practices generate recognisable patterns that signal appropriate stances and positions to readers. In this

view, audience expectations guide the structure of arguments, the selection of evidence, and the presentation of claims. However, these conventions are the result of negotiations; as new scholars engage with and eventually adapt these patterns, audiences and writers together shape the changing practices within their communities.

More recently, the rise of digital platforms and open-access models has added new complexity. Liu (2016) points out that the need to consider diverse readers, from specialists to interested non-experts, forces scholars to find a balance between depth and accessibility. Under these circumstances, the intended audience expands, creating tensions between the precision of academic language and the clarity needed for wider understanding. These tensions encourage researchers to navigate between specialised and general language, shaping the text and its rhetorical strategies in ways that may either compromise disciplinary depth or adapt it for broader engagement. In conclusion, the intended audience in academic writing is a lively and contested area where disciplinary, institutional, and digital factors come together and evolve.

3.0 CRITICAL DISCUSSION

3.1 Disciplinary Peers as Primary Audience

Traditionally, scholarly writing targets an audience of peers within the same discipline. This approach fosters a shared community of knowledge, enabling the gradual development of ideas (Kuhn, 1970). Peer-reviewed journals exemplify this model, supporting disciplinary gatekeeping through established conventions and evaluation criteria. The use of technical terms, rigorous methods, and citation practices is designed to meet the needs of expert readers in the field.

However, this model assumes a uniform, well-defined audience, which is increasingly unrealistic in an age of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research. Current issues, such as climate change, public health crises, and global inequality, require insights from multiple fields. This matter calls for more transparent communication across disciplinary lines. Additionally, such insularity can hide the societal relevance of academic work, a critique often aimed at the humanities and social sciences (Nussbaum, 2010). This matter raises ethical questions about public accountability and the social responsibilities of higher education.

3.2 Institutional and Bureaucratic Audiences

Scholars must also write for institutional gatekeepers, such as tenure committees, funding agencies, and ranking organisations. These groups focus on measurable indicators, like citation counts, impact factors, and grant income. Those issues shape both what scholars write and how they write it (Moore, 2013). The growth of research excellence frameworks, especially in the UK (REF, 2021), shows how academic value has become bureaucratised. Metrics have become stand-ins for intellectual worth, often replacing nuanced qualitative assessments.

This institutional focus creates pressure, promoting productivity over depth and fostering a performative style of scholarship. As a result, the audience for scholars becomes fragmented: one part consists of evaluators, another part is envisioned as future readers, and strategic metrics represent another part. This matter leads to a strategic essentialism, where scholars adjust their work to meet assessment requirements, sometimes sacrificing meaningful

contributions. Furthermore, the push to publish in high-impact journals may distort research priorities toward what is publishable instead of what is socially vital or intellectually bold.

3.3 Public and Policy Audiences

Public scholarship aims to close the gap between academia and society. Efforts such as the Open Access movement and knowledge-sharing platforms (e.g., The Conversation) underscore the need to engage a broader audience (Suber, 2012). Scholars are increasingly writing for non-expert readers, modifying their language, tone, and presentation to connect with these individuals. Calls for accountability, transparency, and relevance in academic research often drive these initiatives.

However, the shift toward public engagement carries some challenges. Critics argue that simplifying ideas can compromise their complexity and that public scholarship may be influenced by populist or neoliberal agendas (Collini, 2012). The emphasis on "impact" as a funding criterion risk reducing academic work to practical outcomes, undermining its critical or theoretical elements. Moreover, writing for policy audiences requires a careful balance between rigour and accessibility, often limited by political or practical concerns. Policymakers may seek actionable insights, sometimes at the cost of nuance and methodological care.

3.4 Digital and Global Audiences

Digital platforms have further broadened scholarly audiences. Blogs, podcasts, and social media enable scholars to connect with global audiences instantly, breaking down traditional barriers to sharing knowledge. These platforms promote conversational and less formal writing, which increases access to scholarly discussions. However, they also pose risks, such as diminishing peer review, spreading misinformation, and potential reputational harm in divisive contexts.

Additionally, the global nature of academia increasingly requires scholars to consider multilingual and transnational audiences in both their research and dissemination practices. Although English remains the dominant language of scholarly publishing, its hegemony has been widely critiqued for reinforcing epistemic inequalities and marginalising non-English-speaking scholars and local knowledges (Canagarajah, 2002; Lillis & Curry, 2010). This linguistic dominance not only limits cross-cultural intellectual exchange but also perpetuates the assumption that legitimate scholarship must conform to Western, Anglophone norms of communication and academic structure (Tollefson & Tsui, 2018). As a result, valuable insights rooted in indigenous languages, regional paradigms, and alternative worldviews often remain excluded from mainstream academic dialogues.

Scholars engaged in decolonial and postcolonial critique argue for a reimagining of academic knowledge production, one that foregrounds epistemic diversity, cultural multiplicity, and linguistic inclusion (Bhambra, 2014; Connell, 2007; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Santos, 2014; Smith, 2021). From this perspective, the idea of a singular, Westernised academic audience is not only reductive but also complicit in maintaining historical hierarchies of knowledge sond power. Instead, decolonial scholars advocate for pluriversality, recognising the coexistence of multiple epistemologies and ontologies, as a foundation for more inclusive scholarly engagement (De Sousa Santos, 2014). This requires

not only expanding the linguistic reach of academic work but also redefining what counts as scholarly legitimacy and who is entitled to produce, share, and evaluate knowledge.

Consequently, academic writers are increasingly encouraged to interrogate their positionalities and consider the broader ethical implications of audience selection and knowledge dissemination (Canagarajah, 2013; Lillis & Curry, 2010; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Pennycook, 2001). Writing with multilingual, transnational, and non-academic publics in mind demands a shift in both rhetorical practice and institutional priorities. It also reinforces the idea that responsible scholarship must not only aim for excellence within disciplinary boundaries but also strive for equity in the global circulation of ideas (Hyland, 2019; Canagarajah, 2013). Canagarajah (2013) encourages scholars to recognise their own linguistic and cultural positionalities when writing for diverse global audiences. Lillis & Curry (2010) highlight how scholars must consider the political and ethical implications of writing for global or marginalised audiences in a dominant language.

4.0 CONCLUSION

Whom a scholar writes for is a question that does not have a simple answer. While immediate academic circles still matter, changing institutional rules, public expectations, and academic values broaden the range of potential readers. Writing thus becomes a multi-voiced event; it addresses various audiences sequentially or at once, which can lead to conflicting interests. This diversity is not just a minor issue but also a key ethical and knowledge-based challenge that requires ongoing self-reflection and careful decision-making.

Understanding this situation is the first step toward reevaluating the ethics and politics of academic writing. Authors must realise that how they frame their audience carries significant power dynamics. Questions arise about who can engage with the text, who is heard, who is ignored, and who is perceived as credible. Therefore, writing is not just about sharing information; it also involves making a political and moral statement.

Future research should explore how digital platforms, the flow of multilingual research, and decolonial methods further challenge traditional ideas of the audience. By exploring these topics, scholars can reclaim control over authorship, choosing to write not only within academic settings but also for broader audiences. Ultimately, the question "For whom do we write?" should elicit a range of thoughtful responses that shape one's scholarly identity and the impact of their work in the world.

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