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Quality control and improvements in research of Islamic Economics*

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Abstract: This paper deals with the question of quality control in researches on Islamic economics and related areas and how to improve it. It is mainly based on the author's short experience as the chief editor of the *Journal of King Abdulaziz University - Islamic Economics* (JKAU-IE). He got motivation to write about it by an article entitled "How to Write an Effective Referee Report and Improve the Scientific Review Process" authored by three American professors. A few points of this article have also been highlighted in this paper in addition to the author's advice to the researchers to avoid dependency on unknown and secondary sources, be careful while referring to the Quran and *ahadith*, do not rely on internet information unless it is supplemented and verified by other reliable sources. Standard rules should be followed in pagination and quotations. The paper also exposes malpractices in joint authorship. It is proposed that it should be made obligatory and a condition for acceptance of a joint paper to add a note, at the beginning or at the end of the paper, to declare which idea or part of the paper belongs to which author. At the end the paper warns of some other unethical practices that cause deterioration of research standard.

Keywords: Islamic Economics, Paper review, Refereeing research paper, Pagination in citation, Joint authorship, Plagiarism.

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1- Introduction

At present there is wealth of researches on Islamic economics and allied subjects but there is dearth of high standard original works. There are various complaints against the publications in this discipline, such as repetitions, plagiarism, lack of rigorous analysis, absence of originality and innovativeness, etc. The present writer finds some other weaknesses, e.g. dependence on unknown sources and inquiry limited to internet information, use of secondary sources, lack of proper referencing, non-compliance of prescribed authors' guidelines, etc. Referees, paper writers and editors should recognize their responsibilities toward this problem. Quality control is the biggest challenge. This

paper is a modest attempt to draw the attention of all those who have stacks in Islamic economics and finance to play their role in improvement of researches in this discipline.

2- Role of the editor

The editor is not a postman. Let us start with the editor. The editor is not a postman as emphasized by the former Chief Editor of the JKAU-IE. His job is not just to receive papers from writers and then deliver them to referees. His foremost duty is to initially assess the paper himself. Surely a single person may not be master of all subjects. Such papers which are beyond his expertise, he should seek help of his colleagues which have skill in the subject. At this initial scrutiny, the paper may be rejected at the outset or the writer may be given certain instructions to make the paper worth for external refereeing.

Selection of referees. As normal practice is the editor should assign the paper to two experts of the subject's area as referees. In selection of referees he should keep in mind the nature of the paper. Especially if the subject matter of the paper is interdisciplinary, referees should be of different expertise. After sending the paper to the referee, the editor and his supporting staff should follow up the matter. Reminder should be sent if the report is unduly delayed and a new referee may be appointed immediately.

After receiving the referee report. After receiving the report the editor should examine it carefully. A third referee may be appointed if two reports are contradictory. In case they suggest certain amendments in the paper or recommend revision and resubmission, the editor should send the combined report to the author to do the needful. Any personal remark or humiliating expression should be excluded. Finally, after receiving the revised paper, the editor should ensure that the author has taken into account all points that need revision or he has satisfactorily defended himself where he does not agree with the referees.

3- Role of the referee – the Context of this presentation

Recently Dr. Muhammad Anas Zarqa has circulated through email attachment a paper entitled "How to Write an Effective Referee Report and Improve the Scientific Review Process". It was published in the *Journal of Economic Perspectives* (31: 1 (2017) 231–

244) and authored by three American Professors - Jonathan B. Berk, Campbell R. Harvey, and David Hirshleifer in which they described their experience with referees and peer reviewers. This motivated this humble person to share his short experience with some of the paper writers, researches, and peer reviewers. But let me first present some useful points of the paper mentioned above which is equally important for Islamic economists.

Three central current problems of refereeing in economics: Berk et al (2017, p.232) begin their paper with what they see as three central current problems of refereeing in economics:

- 1) "giving appropriate weight to the importance and innovativeness of a paper (and not being distracted that such papers may have minor flaws);
- 2) drawing a clear and explicit separation between comments that must be dealt with to make the paper publishable and suggestions that do not affect the publication decision and are therefore optional; and
- 3) living up to the implicit contract involved in a revise-and-resubmit process."

The hardest part of a referee's job: According to them "the hardest part of a referee's job is assessing the *importance* of the paper, which involves judgments about whether a paper is of sufficiently broad interest and offers a sufficiently original contribution to be appropriate for the journal to which it has been submitted" (ibid). "Thus, a referee report should contain a scientifically based argument that explains the referee's assessment of the importance of the work and details the considerations that bear upon your judgment. Only an argument that is scientifically based is useful and informative to an editor in making the decision" (ibid. p. 233).

I should add that for a paper on Islamic economics, the referee should also ensure that it has no Shariah sensitivity. We always ask our peer reviewers: Is the paper free from errors in texts of Quran and *ahadith* and other misquotations from Islamic sources?

Three critical determinants of whether a paper is publishable: There are three critical determinants of whether a paper is publishable in the Journal: (i) whether it addressed a question of sufficiently broad interest; (ii) whether it made a sufficient leap over existing literature; and (iii) whether the analysis was correct. Since most of the

papers I received were “correct”, my decision often boiled down to considering how well the paper fared according to the first two criteria..." (ibid.).

Implications of revise-and-resubmit recommendation: According to the authors the referee should take full care in their recommendation of revise and resubmit because "When you make a revise-and-resubmit recommendation, you are actually making three statements: 1) the paper is of sufficient importance in terms of scope and findings that you believe it is suitable for the journal at hand; 2) there are problems with the paper that currently make it unpublishable in its current form; and 3) these problems are correctable" (p. 236). They advise "Do not hold a submission hostage because, in your (undoubtedly wise) opinion, the paper could be better written" (p. 237).

The ideal cover letter: The purpose of the refereeing report is to help an editor in reaching a decision about publishability of the paper. The first this which an editor reads is the letter received from the referee along with the report. In this regard the authors advise: "The ideal cover letter should succinctly provide three types of information. First, it should include a statement of the broad interest and importance of the paper's contribution relative to existing work. Keep in mind that the editor may not be an expert in this subfield, and it is often hard to figure out the paper's main point or line of reasoning. Second, is the analysis convincing? Third, the cover letter should offer a frank assessment as to whether the paper is publishable as it stands, or whether the paper is likely to be publishable within one round of revision" (240). Again they say, "[i]f you are recommending a revise-and-resubmit, you must give a sound reason, or the editor will likely reject the paper"(ibid.). They also advise "separate numbering for category 1 of key problems and category 2 of suggestions" (p. 241).

4- The Role of Researchers

Avoid dependence on secondary sources: A researcher must rely on original sources. Reliance on secondary sources is common complaint against the writings of the new generation. Desire to increase number of publication in a short time prevent them to spend time and labor to go to original sources. They find the easy way to utilize cooked

material. Sometimes even the verses of the Quran and *hadith* are cited with reference to indirect sources.

By writing Arabic words here and there in their papers they give impression that they know official language of Islam, and consult original sources. But actually it is not so.

Full care should be taken while referring to the Quran: Qur'an is the word of Almighty Allah. One should be very careful in attributing something to the Qur'an. If someone says something *by guess* that it is in the Qur'an, it is a mistake even if it happens to be there. An inference from a certain *ayah* of the Qur'an should be mentioned as inference, not exactly as an *ayah*. For example: proving *waqf*, *mudarbah*, etc. from the Qur'an.

Do not depend on fiqh instead of the Qur'an and Sunnah: Siddiqi (2008, 4) feels that "the source of most of the economics projected as Islamic has been *fiqh*", and that is also mostly picked up from secondary sources. They blur our vision of the total picture because we are living in a different time and place and "with the passage of time the constraining influence of the detailed rules and regulations of *fiqh* seems to have all but extinguished the spark of *maqasid*-inspired thinking" (ibid.). Nienhaus (2012) also feels that the contemporary generation stick to the "legalistic approach". They determine the Shari`ah compliance on the basis of Islamic law or *fiqh* without considering whether there is any economic justification.

Stay away from unknown sources: It is also noticed that some writers base their article on works of less known or unknown authors. Their presentation of Islamic view point is not reliable Adversaries of Islamic economics target such works.

Be cautious while collecting information from internet sources: The invention of internet has considerably increased the availability of information, and facilitated data collection in short time. Sometimes we receive papers in which all or most of sources are addresses of websites. This has affected the quality of research "because there is no barrier to entry, hence regardless of credentials or veracity anyone

can post anything as a “fact” (Ali, 2008, 225). This is, perhaps, one of the main reasons why page numbering is avoided by writers who depend on internet sources.

When page numbers must be given: These days we notice the whole article without a page number. Past scholars had the practice of giving only the title of a book and the author’s name as reference. They were criticized for not giving other details. Now the so called modern scholars are also doing the same thing. They generally do not distinguish whether the reference is to a quotation, specific idea or the subject of the work in general. Sometimes 5-6 references are given without page numbers. Now who has time to search the whole book to verify a certain statement? This type of referencing is hardly better than just writing *Sahih Bukhari*, or *Muqaddimah Ibn al-Salah*.

It may be noted that there is not much difference in citing only *The Wealth of Nations* by Adam Smith or just add the name of publisher and year of publication also, if page number is not given in both cases. Therefore the JKAU-IE emphasizes that the page numbers must be included when referencing a specific idea or information set. The form (Author Year) is acceptable only if the reference is to a work in general.

As mentioned above, one reason for citation of authors and years without page numbers is that the information is collected from internet where page number is generally not given. Such persons refer to a book even without reading it. That is the reason that a few authors when I asked them to provide paging they could not comply and kept silent.

Corruption in joint papers: Research through team investigators is a useful strategy in which members complement and supplement each other. But it is also a way of getting credit without work. Names are added just to oblige a person, strengthen the friendship or to get a favor, sometimes without the knowledge of the other "coauthor".

A very interesting but full of lesson incidence I came across in a conference on Islamic Economics and Finance. A teacher and his students were to present their papers in the same session. The student had the name of his teacher as co-author and argued for risk-sharing, while the teacher in his paper refuted this thesis. This created a very embarrassing situation for the teacher. Ultimately he stood up and said that he would like to clarify something and told the audience that Mr. so and so (his student) added his name in the paper without his permission and that he did not agree with the content of his paper.

The Chief Editor of the JKAU-IE received a letter from a paper writer asking him to include the name of Dr. so and so as the coauthor because he has translated the abstract from English to Arabic.

Here is another incidence. We received a paper for publication. According to the corresponding author, it was based on one of the chapters of his thesis. He wrote five names as coauthors. I inquired whether that chapter of his dissertation is jointly authored by five persons. His innocent answer was that they were his supervisors!

Perhaps this is the reason that recently a conference's call for papers warned that "the joint papers are not accepted".

A proposal how to control misuse of joint authorship. The research ethics, academic honesty and integrity of authors require that the joint work should be really contributed by all authors. Misuse of joint authorship must be checked. To control misuse of joint authorship, it may be made obligatory to add a note, at the beginning or at the end of the paper, to declare which idea or part of the paper belongs to which author. It is hoped that if the paper will not be having ideas or sections as many as the number of authors, the main author may feel shy to include so many authors. It will also absolve others of the responsibilities.

Mutual citation or Quote me I'll quote you to increase citations: Citation of a paper increases the impact factor. Some smart writers innovated a method to increase citations of their papers. They quote each other although their paper may not be worthwhile to be quoted.

No quotation vs. full of lengthy quotations: Quotes should be kept to a minimum, because reviewers and readers tend to think of too many quotes as an indication of a lack of deep analysis which affects the quality of the work. One should try to reduce the number of quotes to a minimum, and paraphrase them in his own words, or analyze their contents. Sometimes we receive papers in which the author not only gives the content of an Arabic text in his own words, but also gives the full Arabic text and its translation, thus increasing the length of the paper.

The other extreme is absence of even a single quotation although the context is demanding so. At certain opinions attributed to past thinker, a reader feels that the exact passages from that scholar's work should have been quoted because quotes are a way to project authenticity and credibility.

5- Concluding remarks: some unethical practices:

Plagiarism: The evil of plagiarism has also been detected. "Plagiarism is presenting someone else's work or ideas as your own, with or without their consent, by incorporating it into your work without full acknowledgement" (<https://www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/guidance/skills/plagiarism?wssl=1>).

In a recently published book on Islamic banking, I found that the author has incorporated in his book (published USA) four pages of a paper by Dr. Ziauddin Ahmad (IRTI/IDB 1994) without any indication that those pages are written by someone else. It is interesting to note that the Introduction of the book is written by another Islamic economist who introduces the author as "a world renowned Shariah Scholar who advises on a wide range of matters relating the law of Islamic banking and finance... ". (to hide the identity of this person, reference of the quotation is omitted). I wonder whether the author's this plagiarism or theft should be publicized to warn others or should be ignored. In the opinion of a leading Islamic economist, "plagiarism is an endemic disease afflicting scholarship" (Siddiqi 2008, 7). To him there are indicators that 'it is assuming bothersome proportions'. However, efforts are going on at various levels to root out this evil. Organizers of various conferences, editors of research journals, and publishers give stern warning on plagiarism (ibid).

Submission of paper to more than one journal: During my association with the editorial work I found that sometimes an author submitted his paper to some other journal also. He withdrew his paper at the last moment when we have completed refereeing of his work. This is unethical because there is instruction by almost all research journals that any author must not submit his paper simultaneously to any other journal for publication so far his paper is under refereeing process.

Withdrawal of paper by an author after refereeing process is completed. We also have bitter experience that some authors withdraw their paper when we have completed the peer review process and send them report to revise the paper. They refuse to revise or just keep silent. The reason may be the same – submission to more than one journal or they are incompetent to revise the paper according to the report.

Delay report or decline review. Delay in report is a frequent experience. It appears that most of the reviewers just wait for reminder and they send the report soon after reminder. Sometimes when reminder is sent, a referee declines review after keeping the paper for a long time. It is much better for all involved to upfront decline a request immediately than to say yes when it won't be feasible to do the report in a timely manner (Berk et al. p. 238). In such cases the refereeing process is to be started a fresh which takes double time to finish. Only the paper writers can feel the pain of delay. Perhaps the editor is blamed for not taking full care of the papers and delay is due to his negligence.

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