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## Editorial

### 50 Years of Area: Taking Stock, Looking Forward

Peter Kraftl, Kavita Datta, Robert Bryant, Fiona Nash

#### 1 | Introduction

2018 marks *Area*'s 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. The journal replaced the Newsletter of the Institute of British Geographers and, under the founding editorship of Hugh Counsell Prince, launched with a remit to publish “short articles on subjects of scholarly interest to geographers” and “report on the proceedings of meetings and conferences held by the Institute and its study groups”. *Area* was positioned as a forum for debate and a vehicle through which new ideas might be generated and developed. The inaugural editorial set out an ambitious agenda to stimulate debate in a broad range of topics across geography through rapid publication. From its inception the journal was intended to be outward-looking, attentive to developments in disciplines aligned to geography, and a space for the exchange of ideas about matters of wider professional and public interest. Although the journal has evolved considerably over the last 50 years, *Area*'s opening remit – to stimulate debate and to be an outlet for new ideas through the rapid publication of concise articles – remains central to the journal's mission.

In the remainder of this Editorial, we look both to the journal's past and to its future. Firstly, we examine some significant publishing trends in *Area* between 1998-2018. Secondly, we use these data – and the occasion of the journal's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary – to map out possible future priorities for the journal and, indeed, for Geography as a discipline.

#### 2 | Publishing in Area, 1998-2018

The past 50 years have witnessed profound shifts in the nature of Higher Education, in research practices and priorities, and in academic publishing. Indeed, as a key outlet for research across the discipline of Geography, publication trends in the journal have been indicative of (if not proxies for) some of these profound shifts. An analysis of a subset of *Area* articles, published between 1998-2018, points to some of these trends. This date range was chosen since the start point marked the publication of Joe Painter's (1998) Editorial, 30 Years of *Area*, which itself afforded both a brief retrospective of the journal's scope and sharpened the journal's focus (and visual format) for a new generation of geographical scholarship. We also note that our analyses of selected publishing trends in the journal represent a broad-brush picture rather than a fine-grained assessment: for instance, in making assumptions about an author's gender<sup>i</sup> based on their name, or in allocating papers to a particular (and in itself fuzzily-defined) “subdiscipline” or theme. With these important caveats in mind, we hope that the following trends prove of interest to our readership. We also use these data as a springboard for mapping out key foci for the journal's future in the final part of this Editorial.

Firstly, Area remains a key outlet for UK-based Geographers. Of the 1,227 papers published in the journal between 1998-2018, 62% were published by authors with a corresponding institution in the UK. In some ways, this is hardly surprising, given that Area is one of the RGS-IBG’s journals, and that it is best-known in the UK, although it is important to recognise that a sizeable minority – over a third – of all authors are non-UK based. Yet, outside the UK (and especially outside Europe), the numbers are fairly small and evenly-spread by continent: approximately 8% each from Asia and North America, 5% from Africa, and 4% from Oceania and South America. The general trend (although slight) is of an increase in authors originating from outside Europe over the twenty-year period, and especially in the past five years.

Secondly, the picture in terms of the gender of authors is mixed. Over the whole 20-year period, just 36% of papers published had at least one female author (with 37% of papers having a lead female author). However, although there is considerable variation by year, the gender gap on this measure has significantly decreased, such that in the years 2016-2018 there has either been gender parity or – as was the case for 2016 – papers with female first authors outnumbered male first authors for the first time. Meanwhile, the total number of female authors outnumbered total male contributors for the first time in 2017. On the face of it, this is clearly good news and something to celebrate; however, the fact that the gender gap in publishing in this journal has closed should not mask wider, ongoing inequalities within the discipline or within the academy more widely, which still require addressing (Maddrell et al. 2016). Moreover, these figures cannot afford a sense of other forms of inequality, marginalisation and Othering – particularly in terms of race (Esson in press; Noxolo 2017a; Desai 2017; Tolia-Kelly 2017) and the persistence of “lopsided’ geographies of knowledge production” (Walker & Frimpong Boamah, 2017; also see Meadows et al, 2016) – to which we return below.

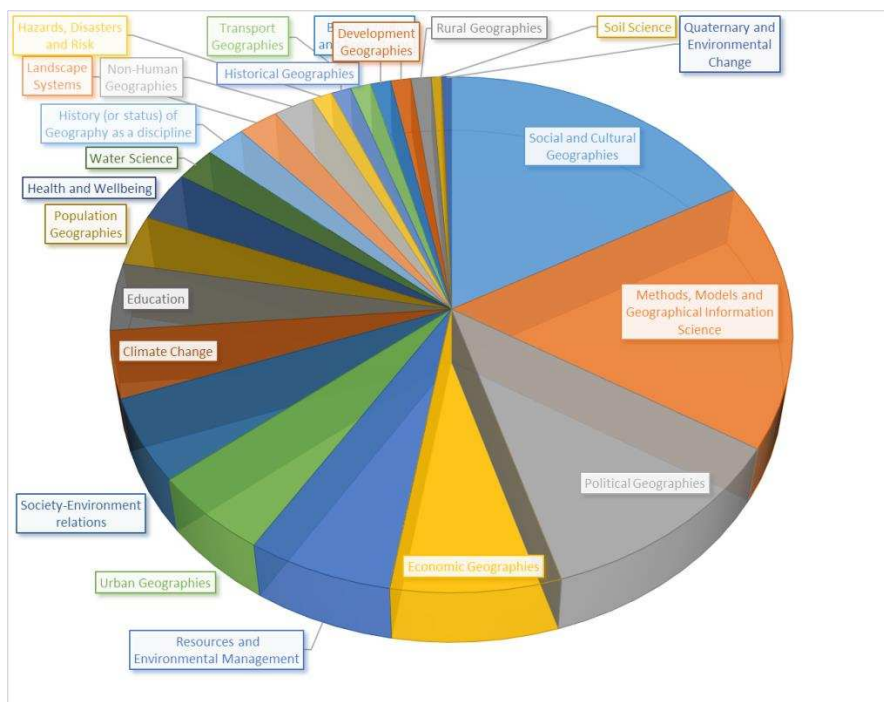


Figure 1: Pie chart showing proportion of Area papers published within major subdisciplines or themes

Thirdly – and with the caveats noted above – it was possible to very broadly categorise 1,213 of the papers into broad subdisciplines or themes (Figure 1). Some of these trends will likely not surprise readers: for instance, as is the case for several ‘general’ disciplinary journals, Area continues to be dominated by submissions from Human Geographers (approximately 60%, not including papers on methods or on the history/status of the discipline). The prominence of Social and Cultural Geographies over the past twenty years is also evident in these data. Moreover, Area remains the ‘go-to’ place for papers about methods and the history/status of the discipline, reflecting (and developing) its original remit. However, equally, it should be stressed that Area is not – and has never been – ‘just a methods journal’, and the data reflect this (as do our updated Aims and Scope, which emphasise our strong preference for ‘methods’ papers that advance empirical, theoretical and/or applied agendas). We also want to flag the increasing prominence of papers by Physical and Environmental Geographers (understood broadly) – testament to the vision and hard work of the Physical Geography Editors of the journal.

Our final observations relate to positive developments in editorial and review practices. Taking the latter first, our concerns regarding authorship evidenced above have also shaped practices relating to reviewing submissions. In a bid to demystify publishing for early career researchers, as well as diversify our reviewers from a gender and nationality perspective, we have increasingly called upon a broader range of colleagues to help us in the review process. Area has also shifted from a single editor to co-editors signifying an important break in scholarly tradition of valuing the ‘lone expert’ to more collaborative forms of co-producing knowledge.

### **3 | Area looking forward**

Without wishing either to predict the future, or to prescribe particular agendas for a journal as wide-ranging as Area, and a discipline as diverse Geography, the occasion of the journal’s 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary nevertheless affords an apposite moment to highlight some potential priorities for the future. It is our sense that a journal such as Area could – and perhaps should – not only publish the latest, cutting-edge research and debate, but could, and should, offer leadership, on issues that matter, both within the discipline and beyond. With these considerations in mind, the three issues on which we focus here – and which are of course three of many possible priorities – are guided by our analyses of previous publishing trends in the journal, above. Our intention is not (as a result) to be inward-looking, but, rather, to use these trends as springboards for the articulation of some possible priorities that, in fact, transcend the journal, the discipline and, in some cases, the academy.

Firstly, we observed above how Area remains a rather UK-centric (and by extension Anglocentric) journal. On the one hand, the journal may always seek to retain an emphasis upon UK Geography and constitute an outlet for UK Geographers – it is, after all, a

publication of the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG). On the other hand, there are much larger forces at play within a globalising and neoliberalising academy, which privilege English-language publishing above all else. It is clear that there could be some more concrete steps towards further, potentially progressive forms of internationalisation. For example, there are opportunities not only to foster links between Learned Societies for Geography in different international settings, but to encourage manifold and deeper forms of collaboration – extending to co-organised workshops and events, sharing of best practices and policies and, indeed, to a consideration of how academic journals such as *Area* could further develop as an outlet for the very best research emerging from outside the UK.

Whilst there is more work for the Society and for journals like *Area* to do on this front, we would also issue a call to the wider academic community – especially in an era characterised by greater levels of international collaboration than perhaps ever before. In particular, in an age of ‘challenge-led’ research – characterised in the UK by the Newton Fund and Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) – academics in the Minority Global North are, increasingly, entering into partnerships with those in the Majority Global South, particularly around development research and capacity-building activities. Quite rightly, several scholars have criticised the ability of challenge-led research (and especially that with a development remit) to enable more thorough-going forms of decolonisation in geographical and other knowledges (Noxolo 2017b). Although the wider (neo)colonial relations and assumptions underpinning GCRF and other funding pots may ultimately remain somewhat untroubled, it might nevertheless be that academics funded through those programmes could engage in smaller or larger acts that might challenge and undermine those “same old colonial processes of absencing, exploiting and, ultimately, forgetting the Indigenous people on whose material conditions [colonialism] was first based” (Noxolo 2017b: 344), and from there attempt to build more progressive forms of knowledge-alliances. Perhaps a smaller act towards this end might be for those Minority World Geographers involved in such research to encourage and support their colleagues to publish their research in journals such as *Area* – and particularly as lead or sole authors. Such a move – amongst many others – might go some way to both redressing the balance of authorial affiliations away from the UK, as well as to providing a concrete step towards the decolonisation of (geographical) academic knowledges.

We are aware of the magnitude of these recommendations, and of the need to implement them with care and thought. Any acts such as these require significant changes amounting to an ‘unlearning’ of the dominant ways in which Minority World geographers have engaged with those from the Majority World. They also run the risk of assuming that publishing in UK/western and/or English language journals is the pinnacle of academic achievement, which might not necessarily or consistently be the case. By the same token as we invite Majority World geographers to publish in ‘our’ journals, we should be responsive to reciprocate by publishing in ‘their’ journals. Progressive forms of knowledge-alliances do not have to centre on – or indeed even involve – Minority World scholars. Moreover, individual responses by authors or groups of authors need to be bolstered by institutional and disciplinary support for such forms of scholarly practice (and here, again, journals like *Area* could have a role to play, even if they are not the ultimate outlets for that scholarship). On

this front, organisations like AuthorAid ([www.authoraid.info/en/](http://www.authoraid.info/en/)), who support Majority World scholars to access and publish in journals, and to establish new journals, could provide established frameworks and expertise for such forms of decentring and alliance-building.

Secondly, and very much related, we are committed to Area being a forum and a mechanism for promoting inclusive, equal and anti-oppressive forms of scholarship and scholarly endeavour, in the widest sense. As the trends above indicate, there have been improvements in the gender balance of authors publishing in the journal; but, gender equality is about more than publishing trends. The same goes for ethnicity, religion, sexuality, age and dis/ability. A particular concern still remains around questions of race in the academy and, perhaps especially, within disciplinary Geography. Recently, Area has begun to work with the Race, Culture and Equality (RACE) Working Group of the RGS-IBG as part of efforts to articulate, challenge and address issues of race and racism in Geography. This work has involved conference sessions, workshops and a range of publications in the journal (see, for instance a special section and Commentary piece on ‘Decolonising Geographical Knowledges’ [Noxolo 2017a; Esson et al. 2017]).

We recognise that these interventions represent perhaps a small part of a much larger commitment to and strategy for both debate and action. On that front, we insist that Area – and other geographical journals – have a continued role to play, in two senses. And it is here that we also urge all Geographers to engage actively (if, indeed, they are not already).

On the one hand, as Esson (2018) observes, “British geography departments and institutions, such as the RGS-IBG, need to adopt an explicitly anti-racist position and acknowledge that coloniality-induced racism is an endemic feature of society and therefore the academy”. As editors of Area, the RGS-IBG journal and a kind of ‘institution’ in itself - we commit, unreservedly and explicitly, to adopting an anti-racist position. This means continuing to actively solicit papers that highlight and challenge racism in the academy, and supporting discussion and debate (whether published or otherwise) that can lead to concrete actions towards racial equality within and beyond the academy. It also means a continued attentiveness to our collective editorial practices – for instance in terms of who is asked to review papers and proposals for special sections.

On the other hand, and acknowledging that this commitment may appear vague, we issue, to all Geographers, a set of specific questions that might animate future papers, Commentaries and debates, within and beyond the journal. Taking Esson’s observation as a starting point, how might academics working in British Geography departments develop, adopt and act upon an explicitly anti-racist position, locally? How might Geographers in leadership positions ensure that such positions inform strategies for change, both within and beyond local Departments? How might we work with our students to develop anti-racist curricula and to decolonise geographical knowledges? What else could we do to ensure that wider forms of student experience are not ensnared within (often unspoken) forms of racism – from the ‘pipeline’ of students into University to the make-up of Geography Societies? How can this work articulate with our research agendas and our research praxes – from how we publish to how we supervise PhD students to what it means to act ‘ethically’?

Of course, whilst race is and should be a particular concern, these questions could and should also be asked (or rather, continue to be asked) about gender, age, sexuality, religion and dis/ability. Indeed, whilst many of us have been engaged in asking these kinds of questions for years, if not decades, it is imperative in the context of a painfully slow pace of change to continually return to and ask them. The fact that we are asking these questions again at this moment in time points to growing concern about the marketisation of higher education and the casualisation of the geography workforce – with the latter trend disproportionately affecting early-career, female and/or non-white scholars – issues which we picked up in this year’s RGS-IBG Annual Conference Area-sponsored session.

Thirdly, then, these questions, and the trends that we observed in terms of the content of Area papers between 1998-2018, lead us to raise two prompts for prospective authors in terms of future submissions. The first prompt, clearly, relates to papers, Commentaries or Special Sections that deal with the above questions about equality and marginalisation and, especially, questions of race and racism. The second prompt – which is related, but articulates a still-wider set of issues – is to repeat and reinforce our call for papers that engage with ‘Ethics in/of Geographical Research’, in the widest sense (see Krafft et al. 2016 for full details). Already, this regular feature has spawned a number of significant interventions, on issues as diverse as body-space relations (Wainwright et al 2018), researching the more-than-human (Bell et al. 2018), the ‘privilege’ of Western academics working in the Majority Global South (Griffiths 2017) and questions of ‘over-research’ in refugee crisis contexts (Pascucci 2017). Recursively, Area continues its (ethical) commitment to being accessible to, and supportive of, early-career researchers.

Fourthly, Area has provided an important opportunity for Physical and Environmental Geographers to highlight key changes to debates, and data and methods used within the discipline. Recently, Area commentaries have considered a range of controversial and pressing environmental issues. For example, Alexander et al., (2017) both evaluate and challenge current management practices relating to flood risk in the UK. Similarly, in our regular papers we see further challenges to our understanding of landscapes and surface processes. In particular, Dixon et al (2018) challenge our perception of a city as an emerging hybrid Anthropocene landform. They highlight the fundamental role that geomorphological processes play in affecting change within urban landscapes and anthropogenic infrastructures. In embracing major changes in data availability, content, and the emergence of citizen science (e.g. Gura, 2013), Big Data, and increased use of the internet of things (e.g. Warren et al., 2016) recent articles in Area have also provided a showcase for these changes might be inflected in geographical scholarship. Mehta and Wilby (2018), through careful utilisation of data from a range of available large-scale climatological and ecological data sources, were able to track the sensitivity of a range of avian species to modes of climate variability within the Indian Subcontinent. Their findings outline the crucial importance of increased availability of data from a range of consolidated “open access” sources that include carefully managed “citizen-based” contributions (Kelling, 2009). As well as calling for further articles and Commentaries on these and related topics, these issues will be further highlighted within

Area through the development of a regular section within the journal that will highlight “new technologies, data and methods in geographical research”

#### **4 | Conclusion**

Area’s past reflects a particular disciplinary, racialised, gendered geography which needs to be constantly acknowledged and challenged – not only in terms of the make-up of the journal’s authors, but its reviewers, Editors, editorial policies and, indeed, the papers it publishes. Looking forward, we seek to retain and sharpen our commitment to publishing cutting-edge geographical research, and hosting to lively, provocative and generative debates about geography as a discipline. Simultaneously, as we have highlighted above, as an Editorial collective, our vision is for a renewed focus on multiple forms of collaboration, co-production and the building of alliances – across often-artificial geographical, (sub)disciplinary and identity boundaries.

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<sup>i</sup> We note that, like the majority of other journals, *Area* does not collect data from authors about their gender. Similarly, we do not collect data about ethnicity, sexuality, religion, age or dis/ability, and we cannot infer these kinds of information from authors' names or from papers themselves.