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On Street Addresses And Middle Names: My Struggle To Upload A Scientific Paper
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PERSONAL VIEWS

On street addresses and middle names: my struggle to upload a scientific paper

Recently I set out to upload an article for possible publication in one of the world's main medical journals, the website of which reported its upload system as offering several benefits to authors. To begin positively, I could in fact find listed in the website's menu of countries the country I live in (Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT), the formal UN designated name for the country since 1967). This was heartening, as until recently I and fellow authors had had to argue with journal editors and publishers for the inclusion of OPT on journals' country menus. I felt quite indignant about this, as many other Palestinians would, as the absence of our country's name implies that we do not exist. But then proofs would come back with "Israel" on them—even after we emailed to correct them—a designation that would have pleased neither side of the Israel-Palestine divide. We experienced this repeatedly, and uploading papers became an uphill struggle.

Although cheered by the early stages of this latest upload attempt, I kept trying to indicate that our country was the OPT, yet somehow Panama would appear in the address, in between sudden interruptions to the internet connection (a fact of life in many developing countries), meaning that I had to start all over again. After several tries and beginning to suspect that perhaps I was just getting too old for all this, OPT finally appeared instead of Panama. You might argue that Panama offers a superior quality of life to that in the OPT, but at this stage in my life I would not change address for the world.

Then the system asked for a street address (mandatory for uploading). As you probably know, in many parts of the developing world this poses a problem. In our case, even if there were formal streets with names and numbers, very few of us know them, other than the officials who, once the Palestinian Authority took control over selected parts of the West Bank and Gaza, began to assign names to streets without telling the public or even using the street names themselves. Streets in most areas in the OPT—even in Ramallah, the most sophisticated of its cities—have no acknowledged formal names. What we have instead is informal, de facto ones, and then only for the main arteries, such as Tireh St, which has coming off it at least 100 streets with no names. Here too, establishments are not known by their street addresses, even though these may exist, which explains the

great enjoyment we experience in giving instructions to visitors. Faced with this dilemma, I simply typed in Beitunia Rd, the main road close to our office. Our actual street officially has a completely different name, but it is Beitunia Rd that we customarily use so that visitors can find us easily.

Then the instructions called for adding district and "zip" code. You have probably guessed that we have no such thing, and so I just placed zeroes in that section to simulate a US zip code so that the form would upload. Yes, some of us had lived in the United States once, so we do know about these codes.

And then we were asked to include the middle initials of those people we suggested as reviewers. The middle initials, to the best of my knowledge, are the first letters of additional names given to Christians when they are baptised and as such are rarely if ever used by people from other cultures and religions. Given this additional dilemma, by now I had picked up more courage—and a bit of cynicism—and gave the reviewers the middle initials of A, B, C, and D, just because it is always good to be systematic.

Finally, I reached the authors' names, and lo and behold middle names were needed. And so I typed an H instead of a middle name for myself, the first letter of my father's name, as here in the OPT we usually use names of people's fathers, grandfathers, and great grandfathers to identify them. One of the authors kindly obliged by agreeing for a Z to be placed in the space marked in yellow (indicating that filling it in was mandatory), given that middle names don't feature in his culture. He actually liked Z for a middle name, he wrote. I had suggested beginning with Z, in reverse alphabetical order, to differentiate authors from the reviewers, whose middle initials I'd started at A. Another author had a double barrelled name, so I was able to use the initial of the first of these, N, for a middle name. She too is from a culture that does not use middle names. The third author's middle name I gave as Y (next in the sequence), which was in fact her father's initial, so it was a perfect fit. I did not wait for the fourth author's reply (who also did not have a middle name, he later said) and systematically gave him an X, and anyway X looked rather good, as in Malcom X. And the claim is that uploading would make things easy for authors. Which authors, I wondered.

Inclusion means creating websites that take into account different cultures, ways of life, and contexts

In this new age of web based "journals," researchers and scientists from all over the developing world are beginning to get access to the literature, by virtue of the new free or reduced price search engines. The World Health Organization's Health Inter-Network Access to Research Initiative (HINARI), which enables researchers in developing countries to gain cheap access to thousands of health and medical journals, has been a real eye opener for many of us, as we could never otherwise have afforded to download the articles. However, as necessary as this step has been, it is also insufficient. What is now required is genuine "inclusion." And inclusion means many things. It means creating websites that take into account different cultures, ways of life, and contexts. It means opening up space for the scientists of the developing world to be heard and for scientists the world over to read beyond what is published in the West or according to Western paradigms. Above all, it means accepting and accommodating the different ways in which science and research are construed around the world. After all, all research depends on which questions you ask.

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