Canada's Student Journal Forum: From Humble Beginnings to National Conference

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Abstract: Student Journal Forum began as an in-person half-day event at the University of Toronto (U of T) in 2015. It was organized by a group of librarians with the goal of connecting editors of 60+ student-led U of T journals with publishing supports, best practices, and with each other. The audience's enthusiastic engagement and the community-building power of the event prompted the librarians to offer it again the next year, and the year after. Eight years later, this local annual event has grown into a Canada-wide virtual gathering. The shift to online during the COVID-19 pandemic was a key catalyst to open the Forum to students to connect remotely, and for the event to be jointly organized by multiple libraries across Canada. The event's offering has evolved as well, moving from librarian-led publishing best practice sessions to student-led presentations and participatory learning sessions. The most recent 2023 Forum featured an open call for proposals that let student editors share their experiences and present on topics that mattered to them. It was complemented by a half-day of publishing skill sessions presented by Canadian librarians and two panels with scholarly editors and publishing professionals. In this paper, we reflect on the evolution of the Student Journal Forum, its successes and challenges, and its role in establishing the connection between student editors across Canada and between different Canadian libraries that offer student journal publishing support.

Student Journal Forum: The Beginnings

Student Journal Forum was established at the University of Toronto (U of T) in 2015. It started with a phone call to U of T Libraries from a student who asked: "How could a print student journal be a part of the library collection?"

This inquiry led to a series of questions connecting the dots between different library departments. Do U of T Libraries have a process for collecting student-run journals? What about the university archives? Are the Libraries supporting student journals? If yes, how? What other supports are available for them at U of T? And how many student journals does U of T have?

Following an environmental scan, it was established that U of T had about 60 student journals, 15 of which were hosted by the library on Open Journal Systems (OJS). Student editors could request free library hosting, receive copyright and scholarly communications support, and have their journals listed in the library catalogue and their print archives in the University of Toronto Archives and Records Management holdings. Outside of U of T Libraries, student editors could receive support via their respective student unions, departments, as well as (at that time) the Hart House Literary and Library Committee.

Unfortunately, these services were not well advertised or connected, and were unknown to most student editors. Consequently, the first Student Journal Forum event organized by U of T Libraries in 2015 aimed to:

- Connect student journal teams with services available at the library and beyond.
- Share publishing best practices, skills, and tips, and
- Facilitate networking between student editors.

Additionally, to help bring student editor supports together, the library organizers created a [Student Journal Publishing guide](#), which also became the home of the annual [Student Journal Forum websites](#), and established a [U of T Student Journal Directory,](#) which, to this day, remains the largest public student journal directory in Canada.

Evolution of the Annual Student Journal Forum

The inaugural [2015 Student Journal Forum](#) was a full-day event with a catered lunch provided by U of T Libraries. It featured a keynote by a "star" faculty member, publishing skills presentations by librarians, a panel of student journal editors, and a Show and Tell networking session. The attendance by graduate and undergraduate U of T students and their enthusiastic engagement motivated the cross-departmental group of library organizers to make it an annual event.

For the following few years, the Forum followed the same pattern of a full or half-day catered event targeting U of T student editors. Soliciting Forum topics from attendees during registration and requesting post-Forum feedback helped inform the move to include more student-led sessions. The focus has also gradually shifted from library-centered "didactic" presentations towards student-centered sessions, table discussions, and networking. An inside peek at the 2018 Forum was captured by one of the presenters Farah Quaiser from STEM Fellowship Journal (Quaiser, 2018).

In 2020, the annual Forum broke the mold and expanded beyond U of T to become a Toronto-wide event. It was co-organized by U of T and York University Libraries, welcomed attendees from three Toronto institutions, and included both York and U of T panel presenters. It

also featured a half-day bootcamp for journal editors that covered the topics of journal management, copyright, peer review, and discoverability.

When the COVID-19 pandemic forced institutions to move online, Student Journal Forum organizers saw an opportunity to expand the Forum beyond Toronto and make it into a Canada-wide virtual event. It was made possible thanks to the joint volunteer effort of librarians from eight Canadian institutions who joined forces to form the new organizing committee. This was an unprecedented grassroots initiative in Canada and a welcomed opportunity for librarians to break out of their silos and collaborate on an event that most individual libraries would not organize on their own.

The 2021 event was hosted virtually over four days, with a few short sessions each day. It followed the established pattern of librarian- and student-led presentations, skill sessions, and networking. University of Toronto Press editors were invited for an informal Ask Me Anything (AMA) session that was quite popular.

This virtual Canada-wide collaboration was so welcomed that the organizers decided to do the same in 2022, this time as a group representing ten universities. There was, however, a big change. For the first time in its history, there was a call for proposals that allowed students to send in their presentation ideas. The organizers viewed this change as a logical next step in the ongoing progression of the Forum toward more student-owned and generated content. The organizing committee also offered to mentor applicants who needed extra help with their presentations—this was not ultimately needed as all students were proficient with virtual presentations by that time.

The committee received 25 proposals from journals all across Canada which were reviewed using a rubric, accepted, and slotted into a 2-day schedule. Student-led presentations were outstanding, with topics ranging from mixed media publishing to managing cross-institutional collaborations to decolonizing academic publishing. An outline of the event was captured by the Public Knowledge Project (PKP) (Mangahis, 2022), which also became the first non-library event sponsor, offering a gift card draw to the presenters and assisting with social media coverage during the event.

Shifting the focus from librarian-picked presenters to student-initiated submissions allowed for the event to center on students' priorities and on the topics they were interested in, presented by peers they could better relate to. Peer presentations brought in new perspectives from a variety of journals, boosted audience engagement, and encouraged more presenters to stay for the duration of the Forum rather than leave after their session. And, unsurprisingly, it also helped reduce the workload for the Forum organizers, which was welcomed by the pandemic-stretched librarians.

Student Journal Forum 2023

The virtual Canada-wide collaboration continued into 2023—this time as a group representing eight Canadian universities. With a desire to bring back important skill building and engagement opportunities with established editors and scholarly publishing professionals that were not present in the previous iteration of the Forum, while balancing student-led contributions, a blended approach was undertaken to develop the program. The duration of the Forum was also expanded to 3 days to accommodate the additional content.

Presenters for the skills-based sessions and expert panels were recruited from among the organizers and their professional networks. A call for student-led presentations was undertaken

to build content for the remaining two days of the Forum. Unlike the 2021 call for submissions for student presentations which provided numerous options of presentation formats and lengths, the format was standardized with only a 10-minute presentation option to allow for the possibility of even more student voices to share their experiences. The committee received 35 proposals from journals all across Canada which were reviewed using a rubric, accepted, and organized into a 2-day schedule according to common themes.

The 2023 Student Journal Forum took place virtually over three days, February 21 to 23, and welcomed attendees from universities and colleges across Canada, the United States, and Europe. The program was comprised of librarian- and student-led presentations, professional panels, and many opportunities for questions, discussion, and networking. All student presenters are active members of the editorial boards of undergraduate or graduate journals publishing in a variety of disciplines, such as medicine and the health sciences, musicology, and film studies.

The Forum opened with a half day of skills-based sessions led by scholarly communications and digital publishing librarians from post-secondary institutions across the country. With the intention of providing student journal editors and their teams with expanded knowledge of the publishing process from experts in the field, topics covered included project management, copyright, online discoverability, peer review, and inclusive publication practices. Educational materials from the skill share, mainly slide decks and handouts, were made available on the Forum's website, with recordings and transcripts to follow. These transcripts were made possible thanks to the sponsorship by the U of T Libraries.

The second day of the Forum began with the first two rounds of student presentations. In the first block, three presentations about equity and inclusion in journal publishing were heard, followed by a 15-minute question period. In the next block, the presentations were broadly categorized under journal management, covering the topics of starting a new student journal, copyright law as it applies to student publishing, and special or topical journal editions where members of Canada's oldest student-run medical journal shared their experiences planning for its centennial edition. Following these presentations was another opportunity for attendees to partake in a question-and-answer period.

Next, attendees were invited to participate in an informal AMA panel discussion with experienced journal editors ready to share tales of their experiences and answer questions related to any and every aspect of journal editing. This session was positively received amongst Forum attendees and resulted in a lively and lengthy discussion.

The focus of the student presentations on the third and final day of the Forum was engagement. In the first session, students discussed internal engagement from a variety of perspectives. Topics covered included ways by which the rate of submissions could be improved for newly established journals, keeping reviewers engaged with submission content and the peer review process, using unique policies around peer-review and open access, as well as the development of editor training criteria. The focus of the second session was engagement with communities outside a journal's editorial team, including communications and marketing strategies for journal promotion in general, publication of a special edition, and community building across Canada.

The Forum concluded with a panel session, co-hosted with the Society for Scholarly Publishing (SSP), where student journal editors were invited to bring their questions about how the skills and experience acquired in their current roles can be applied to future endeavors in academia and/or the workplace. Scholarly publishing professionals from the American Psychological Association, Penn State College of Medicine, and J&J Editorial happily shared the

details of their career trajectories and offered first-hand advice about advancing in the publishing industry.

A detailed account of the 2023 Forum was put together by PKP (Racy, 2023), who once again offered sponsorship and social media coverage to this year's event.

Challenges, Takeaways, and Future Plans

Participant feedback has been collected every year in the form of an online survey. While the survey questions have evolved from year to year, they have generally focused on participants' satisfaction with the event, and on identifying the topics that were useful and those that could be covered in the future. In 2022-23, additional questions were added to solicit presenters' feedback on the application process and support provided by Forum organizers.

Overall, feedback received over the years has been positive, with an average rate of response at 40% in 2023. The majority of 2023 feedback survey respondents indicated that the event either met or exceeded their expectations, taking from the presentations and panel discussions new perspectives, ideas, and information that can be applied to their own journal projects. While some participants would have liked to have seen representation from additional graduate student journals, the ideas and perspectives presented by undergraduate editorial boards were deemed to be useful and engaging.

When the Forum moved online, achieving sustained participation was challenging. More often than not, presenters would deliver their presentations and then leave the meeting. By grouping presentations of similar topics and delaying the question-and-answer periods until all of the presentations were heard, interest was maintained, and participation numbers remained steady not only from session to session, but from one day to the next as well. The organizers also identified that having slightly fewer presentations (3 versus 4) in each one-hour presentation block allowed for more time for questions and provided room for housekeeping messaging and possible technical troubleshooting during the session.

As the Forum expanded beyond its U of T Libraries roots, the Forum also struggled with branding. A Twitter account, @CanadaSJF, was created in 2022 to help streamline communications and attempt to connect with institutions and student journals across Canada, but no visual identity was established. In 2023, the PKP Communications team put together a visual identity and assets for the organizers as they prepared to do a social media takeover of the Student Journal Forum Twitter account. Leading up to the Forum and throughout the 3-day event, nearly 100 tweets were posted advertising the program, upcoming presentations, and gift card draw winners. With a cohesive aesthetic and persistent messaging, the Student Journal Forum Twitter account saw an increase in followers of approximately 40% by the end of the event, as well as the majority of tweets seeing, for the most part, engagement numbers in the hundreds. While PKP's Twitter campaign proved successful, the future of the platform remains uncertain. Should Twitter cease to exist or become increasingly difficult to use, the organizing committee may need to assess alternative venues for such activity.

The Forum website also underwent an expansion in 2023 in a desire to improve discovery of the detailed program, which had only been provided as an external document linked from the website in the previous year. Each day of the Forum was now presented on a separate page with a schedule of events containing direct links to detailed information about the student presenters, links to their journals, and presentation abstracts posted below. Finally, having a single open

Zoom room for the duration of the three days helped minimize the confusion and welcome attendees who would come and go as their schedules allowed.

One of the initial Forum goals was to create a space for journal editors to meet, network, and learn from each other. Moving from a local to a virtual nation-wide event made this task easier to accomplish during the days of the event, but harder to sustain long-term. The organizers have been continuously looking into ways to keep student editors connected beyond the several days of the Forum. A listserv for Canadian student journal editors set up in 2022 has not seen a significant uptake and has been mostly used by librarians to share publishing-related events. There have also been ongoing conversations about establishing a public directory of Canadian student journals, but without a single Canadian organization to take up its hosting and maintenance, they have not moved ahead.

A push for community-building has come from student editors as well. At SJF 2023, the editors of The Meducator pitched the establishment of the National Council of Undergraduate Academia through which editorial teams could meet on a quarterly basis to discuss trends and issues in student journal publishing, progress, lessons learned, and opportunities for collaboration (Sun & Bansal, 2023).

Community-building, student-led discussion topics, and publishing best practices will remain at the core of the Student Journal Forum as planning kicks off for the 2024 event. The organizers will continue following the student editors' lead to ensure the event evolves to meet the needs and interests of this engaged community.

We hope these reflections help student and librarian groups outside of Canada to consider the kinds of networks and events that could support student journal publishing in their areas. Maintaining an annual event requires a continuous commitment from a core group of organizers, but there are many other shapes and forms through which a network could grow. Many institutions and libraries already provide support for student publishing locally, including training and presentations, so co-organizing and opening those up to a larger community would help both reach a wider audience and reduce the duplication of effort. Putting technical resources together to offer the hosting of journal publishing platform at a consortium or national level is another way to reduce strain on individual institutions. Further involving international organizations, such as PKP, SSP and possibly other publishing associations and libraries, could help the network could grow beyond national barriers and be enriched by the diversity of its members.

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