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Some Thoughts on Sociology Journal Publishing In The 21st Century

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Abstract The recent shift toward electronic publishing fundamentally changed the production and economics of scholarly journal production—and rapidly changing technology makes this an open-ended dynamic. Simultaneously, professional societies, faculties and university administrators, increasingly exposed to the hyper-competitive world of emerging “neo-liberalism,” are increasingly reluctant to adequately support editorial offices and contribute to journal peer review. This is creating a “crisis” for journals, illustrated here in reference to sociology. The essay concludes with some suggestions for how a regional journal like *Sociological Perspectives* might be able to adapt and stay relevant in the 21st century.

Keywords Journal publishing · Impact Factor · Reviewers/reviewing · Editors · Editorial process · Neo-liberalism

The special issue editors asked me to consider issues of contemporary sociology journal publishing. I have been the editor of *Social Problems*, a co-editor of *Contemporary Sociology*, and am currently the editor of *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*; I’ve also served on a number of Editorial and Publication Committees, considering all matters of decisions regarding journals, editors, etc. As a member of the Pacific Sociological Association, I am familiar with *Sociological Perspectives* (and, yes, I have served on the PSA Editorial Committee, albeit not recently). By the end of this brief essay I will attempt to offer some thoughts on the future of regional journals like that one. But I want to begin with some more general challenges facing *all* refereed sociology (and probably all social science) journals.

Of course, one big issue is all the changes in the past decade or so in publishing. It wasn’t too long ago that the journals which professional societies published were their main draw in terms of attracting members (who wanted a paper subscription of that sponsored journal) as well as major money generators via lucrative library subscriptions. In fact, while associations vary in terms of the transparency of their budgets (and, sadly, our national sociology organization’s budget is historically very opaque!), it is a

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poorly-kept secret that journal revenues have long been major inputs paying salaries and office rents for many societies. But the rise of electronic publishing created much uncertainty and angst. Some journals are now only available in online forms; with the rise of easy electronic access to college library subscriptions, the personal mailed subscription holds very little appeal (particularly for younger generations of scholars). And there has been tremendous foment (and even confusion!) in the past few years about how to “package” electronic subscriptions, whether to participate in various “consortia,” what sort of “access” to offer in terms of lagged “firewalls” and “article embargoes,” etc. Presses, publishers and professional associations have grappled with these issues, occasionally blundered, and, candidly, this is still very much “work in progress.” The emergence of “open access” journals—which, frankly, are not a widely accepted “model” in social science and almost surely will not work well in our disciplines—is another complicating factor.

The “open access” journals that do occasionally sprout up at the margins of our discipline, illustrate a basic “problem” that refereed publications must solve. Editing journals involves a *lot* of work and skill. You need very competent scholars in the key decision-making position of Editor/Co-Editor—and you also need to convince them to put in long hours of work (reading papers and determining if they merit external evaluation, finding reviewers, cajoling referees to report, making decisions and writing letters to authors, etc.). The “free” open access journals in sociology usually are based on the idea that all this can be done with unpaid “volunteers”—the result, almost invariably, is unqualified editors, editorial boards and referees, lousy reviews and, ultimately, a substandard product.

The more respected established journals, whether “owned” by an association or simply published by a press, operate on a different model—but, in fact, they have to “solve” the resource problem, too. The challenge here is to recruit and retain top-notch academics, who are knowledgeable in their fields, highly organized, responsible and trustworthy, and capable of making wise judgments about the work of their scholarly peers, to be journal editors. In the past, many Editors served because they saw it as prestigious and career-enhancing—but also because it was understood that host institutions benefitted in various ways and were willing to provide resources (like funded graduate assistance or faculty “course release” for editors and co-editors). In that era, scholars also considered it both an honor and obligation to serve as reviewers for journals. Since there was a general understanding that this was “good professional citizenship”—not to mention, just the “right thing to do”—the annual printed acknowledgment of thanks to a journal’s referees (and the understanding that serving as a manuscript evaluator might make an editor more obligated to make sure *your* paper got a fair and thorough evaluation when it was submitted) was enough motivation to serve.

Unfortunately, for those of us who are journal editors today, a veritable sea shift has occurred in US academia. It is probably part and parcel of a wider turn in our entire society (even world-system?) toward “neo-liberalism.” We now live in a hyper-competitive atmosphere in which individual actors, including faculty members, feel that they need to do whatever they can to promote their personal interests in very concrete, tangible ways. So it seems very “rational” to think narrowly about what tasks and time-allocation will further individual career-goals. For research-oriented scholars, the main objective is to do things that will “build your vita” and “count” in your next “case” for a promotion or a raise. Journal reviewing, frankly, is not one of these tasks. (I sometimes

need to invite as many as 20 appropriate scholars to review in order to find three or four who say they will; often one or more of those either fails to ever return an evaluation or does so months past the target date and only after persistent badgering.) Indeed, increasingly, even journal editing—which at one time attracted the luminaries of the field—is now often seen as a diversion from the really important business of publishing or writing fundable research grants. (Many faculty at research universities now see people who are willing to consider editorships as foolish and impractical... or worse!)

This ethos of denigrating journal labor and editing is pervasive and, apparently, spreading. It now affects administrative support for journal editors and scholars' application for editorial positions. In my own experience (and I am only going back a decade to a decade and a half), I was able to generate considerable support for hosting major journals on my own campus (my then-Dean offered me space, equipment and some concessions on hiring graduate assistants, plus nearly a half-time teaching release—not only when I was solo editor of a major journal, but even when I was “only” a co-editor). But in a recent editorial search for a major journal (which I participated in), very few candidates applied in large part due to the reluctance of Deans and administrators on multiple US campuses (including, very tellingly, my own!) to provide adequate course “release time.” (Indeed, a serious concern about the candidate who was ultimately selected for that position was a relative dearth of this sort of support—and worries that the person would literally not have adequate time to do that job.) Of course, this degradation of the journal labor and editing is deeply paradoxical: the *same* administrators who are telling potential editors they will not support sufficient course release for their faculty to do journal editing, are increasingly judging scholarly performance almost exclusively on publication records... in those same journals! Some of this may, of course, reflect the reality (particularly in public universities) of declining funding for higher education (which, arguably, is part of our societies' neo-liberal turn emphasizing “user fees”—here read “tuition”—rather than tax-based funding). In recent years it is also true that these administrators may be facing a more highly “competitive” marketplace (for attracting students and various external resources) and a higher education landscape that is increasingly judged by various “measurable” quantitative factors favored by various accreditation agencies. In this system it may be hard to “score points” for editing and reviewing journals. However, there is an enormous “disconnect” here between an unwillingness to provide support for academic journal editing, while increasingly relying on publication in those same outlets as the main indicator for academic success and advancement. Sadly, in the long-run, this is a dysfunctional situation. Someone, somewhere, will have to “pick up the cost” that the administrators are sloughing off—and associations like the PSA may need to consider budgeting “course buyout” for editors if they want to maintain journal quality, since this is a time-consuming job. While we can try to empathize with the various administrative pressures they face, academic administrators need to be pushed hard by faculty to demand that they provide editorial offices with the resources to provide sufficient support/rewards. But I don't see any groundswell for that sort of position among my faculty colleagues.

Another part of the neo-liberal tendency is a growing attitude by decision-makers (often society or association officers) that the journals are “cash cows” that should generate even *more* revenue—and the way to do that is to “shop around” and find the “best deal” from competing publishers. Historically, quite a number of the top

sociology journals were produced by non-profit university presses in very stable long-term arrangements, arguably partnerships based on shared intellectual values. But the “bottom-line” driven impulse seems to predominate now and associations are moving toward corporate publishers, with increased attention toward glossy marketing packages and an eager eye toward the next time that the “contract will be out for bid.” Maybe I am a hopeless traditionalist. But I am unimpressed by this tendency—and very wary about the way “business interests” often outweigh editorial acumen when it comes to the choices that are made. There is also an argument, which I find quite *unpersuasive*, that a company that produces many academic journals (or has a very large “sociology list”) is obviously “better” (again, this seems to have something to do with “marketing”). Just to be clear: I am not saying that privately owned publishers, with large “stables” of journals, are necessary “bad” (indeed, I currently work as an editor for one of these firms myself!); nor would I impugn the motives behind the search for “the best deal” for a society. But this shift makes me leery. I am not certain it will serve the interests of disciplines like sociology in the long run.

The final “big issue” I will address involves what sort of “strategy” should a society like the PSA (or other regional sociology associations) consider for a journal like *Sociological Perspectives* in the future. I assume devising good plans would involve keeping the journal not only solvent but in wide circulation and profitable, maintain its reputation as a very solid (if not “first tier”) disciplinary outlet, and innovating in ways that might take advantage of changes and trends in this new millennium.

In my experience (alluded to above), there are some who see this as mainly an issue of the magic of marketing (and I think that does help explain why large private publishers seem particularly attractive, since they often have global distribution and sales offices, sophisticated corporate approaches to selling librarians on subscriptions, etc.). That’s all fine—and not without merit. But, despite the legendary stories of the Madison Avenue wizards who can “sell ice cubes to Inuits,” the real issue here is whether your journal contains articles that people want to read, are eager to access through their libraries, etc. And, ultimately, that content depends on your Editor or editorial staff. This suggests that a great deal of effort should be put into recruiting really able top-notch scholars into those positions (which seems to be becoming increasingly difficult in the current climate of US academia). Perhaps now I am just being naïve, but I do believe that good editors, with solid judgment, who follow the protocols of rigorously refereed review, will end up publishing quality articles. Ultimately, our disciplinary colleagues want to read and cite exactly this sort of work. In fact, I would bet over time that a journal that publishes many high-quality sociological articles (regardless of their specific empirical focus, theoretical bent, etc.), will end up moving up on various measures of quality like citation-driven “Impact Factor,” and that will promote circulation and, ultimately, revenue generation for the journal’s owner.

Recently, I have been in a number of editorial committee meetings (not for PSA, I should note) that included various discussions of journal “direction.” Some of these ultimately were (at least implicitly) grounded in the chimerical chase to “improve Impact Factor”; others involved trying to respond to increasingly globalized audiences and readerships for sociology research. I am a great skeptic about precisely what Impact Factor really means, whether it is a “good measure,” etc. It is clearly true that Impact Factor scores “bounce around” from year to year. Deciphering, at least in the short-run

(and here I mean a few *years*), why journals go up or down on these rankings is extremely difficult. However, librarians and administrators evaluating tenure and promotion cases apparently actually *do* take these seriously, so they are a “reality” that we face. It seems pretty certain that articles that are “grouped” by theme, whether or not they appear in a “special issue” might be more highly cited (because readers interested in the topic will find multiple papers). Because of the way these scores are computed, it also makes sense to make an article accepted for publication electronically available “online first” as soon as possible, since that will enhance its probability of it being cited within the next year, 2 or 5 years. But both of these “strategies” often depend on editorial office procedures for producing final copy, what sort of “backlog” of accepted manuscripts editorial offices have, whether they are “on” their publication schedule (or “behind” or “ahead”), etc. As an Editor of a major refereed journal, I have done rigorously reviewed “special issues”—but the simple truth is that these are very difficult to pull together and take an enormous amount of time (and, frankly, there may be a temptation to “fudge” the evaluation process to accept papers that might not be published as quickly via “normal” review). My own view is that a journal like *Sociological Perspectives* might consider the “special issue” route (but only if they remain rigorously vetted via the usual evaluation process) but should refrain from relaxing its standards to accommodate invited review papers by well-known authors (which also are likely to draw lots of citations and improve Impact Factor, but reduce actual journal rigor).

A somewhat separate topic is the idea of pushing a journal toward some sort of particular specialization or niche, or perhaps trying to expand the substantive purview (this latter idea seems relevant to current discussions of developing more “global reach” for US sociology journals). The selection of a scholar as the new Editor of a journal can sometimes (perhaps quite mistakenly) lead colleagues to believe that the outlet will become a venue for the sort of work that person does. (This might be an unintentional “niche” strategy, which is probably best to avoid.) But, perhaps partly because I am a practitioner of world-system analysis and a comparative researcher, I actually am quite sympathetic to the idea of broadening a journal’s purview to include more of the world. Sociology is a relatively young discipline everywhere, and quite “emergent” in some global regions; arguably, sociologists (wherever they are) should be doing scholarship that addresses worldwide dynamics and problems. When I think about *Sociological Perspectives* as the journal of the Pacific regional association, it does seem like there is an opportunity to consider that region not merely as the western United States but, literally, as the Pacific Rim, including the nations that are on the other side of that very broad ocean! There are rather well-developed (if still not terribly large) communities of sociologists in places like Australia and New Zealand. More significantly, it turns out, that East Asia is not only an area of rapid economic growth and dizzying social change, but also a region where sociology is growing at a rapid clip, too. So intentionally and strategically trying to pull in authors from this region and studies about it, could be quite a good idea!

But this does not just “happen” by fiat—or a vote of an Editorial Committee. Once again, the crucial player is the Editor and decisions she makes about things like her Editorial Board, potential calls for “themed issues,” efforts to do real “outreach” to overseas scholars and comparative researchers (who, perhaps, would not expect the journal to be a potential publication venue for them), some intentional “mentoring” of

junior authors who are from or write about the targeted world region, etc. Frankly, all this would require some commitment—and real honest-to-goodness hard work!—on the part of a journal editor: she would need to have the time and energy to “branch out” and do some of these things (which, frankly, is a huge challenge if you are already overworked and your editorial office seems to be constantly flooded with a tsunami of new submissions and revisions). The point is that many journal editors in the current regime are overworked, undercompensated and struggling just to “handle” the flow of whatever manuscripts are submitted. For them it’s hard enough to just manage the large workload that they inherited by virtual of the journal’s “normal operations,” much less some “new initiative.” So I think some sort of push to make *Sociological Perspectives* a journal particularly attuned to the Pacific Rim would be forward-looking and exciting—but it will require strong commitment from the Editor(s) and probably some resources from the association to make it real rather than just rhetorical.