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Why Do We Publish?

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Abstract Academic publishing has changed enormously over the past 30 years. The reasons are many. Publishers are grappling with the consolidation of their industry, the emergence of electronic publishing, decreased subscription rates and increased production costs. In addition, heightened competition in academe and the corporatization of colleges and universities is changing the evaluative and reward structures for scholarly work—sometimes in troubling ways. As we think about this changing landscape and plan for the future of academic publishing, one very basic question deserves our most serious considerations, namely: why do we publish? In this essay, I consider that question, focusing both on the cultural ideals and cultural realities of academic publishing, as well as the changing context of the activity. Then, I offer some ideas on how we might reconcile ideals and realities in ways that move our discipline forward.

Keywords Academic publishing · Cultural ideal · Cultural realities · Replication · Debate and exchange · Translation and transmission

Introduction

When editor Lawrence Nichols asked me to reflect on the state of academic publishing, a number of issues immediately came to mind. Many of these topics are addressed by the other authors in this issue, including the consolidation of the publishing industry, the growing presence of electronic publishing, the politics of academic publishing; the corporatization of academe and its repercussions for the evaluation and reward of scholars. But as all those issues raced through my mind, one question kept overpowering all other considerations: Why exactly do we publish?

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The Cultural Ideals of Publishing

Why do we publish? Graduate school seems the time when scholars must form an answer to that question. In my training, my mentors provided distinct criteria. We were taught to look for ongoing puzzles in our area of substantive interest and to find ways in which such issues could be extended, shifted or contested. Publishing our work, we were taught, allowed us to lay the next few feet in a road of scholarly inquiry, or perhaps, build a detour to a new and exciting destination.

As I look at the mission statements offered by our field's core journals, I find that the reasons for publishing read as a bit more demanding. The process is seemingly restricted to innovation, originality, and the breaking of new ground. For example, the *American Sociological Review* invites "*new* theoretical developments, results of research that advance our understanding of fundamental social processes, and important methodological *innovations*" (my emphases).[1] The *American Journal of Sociology*'s agenda is even bolder, describing its mission as follows: "The journal presents *path-breaking* work from all areas of sociology, with an emphasis on theory building and *innovative* methods. … *AJS* prizes research that offers *new* ways of understanding the social" (my emphases).[2] *Sociological Forum, (*a journal I currently edit) follows suit, calling for "high quality, *cutting edge* research on substantive issues of *fundamental importance* to the study of society."[3] The "official" message on publishing is clear—if you want to see your work in print, think new, think big, think deep.

The Cultural Realities of Publishing

I have been the editor of *Sociological Forum* since 2007, and over the years, I have edited special issues of the journals *Poetics* and *Sociological Inquiry.* I also have also been a member (and for 1 year, the chairperson) of the American Sociological Society's Publications Committee where I learned much from the experiences of other editors. Based on that wealth of input, I feel confident in saying that the ideals of academic publishing present admirable, even lofty goals. But like most cultural ideals, the goals often fail to be fully realized. It would be wonderful if every article we published presented something novel and exciting. However, most of the articles we publish fail to meet such a challenging standard. Editors and reviewers more often nurture the pieces that continue conversations or fill gaps in an existing literature. Very few manuscripts bring to light pathbreaking, cutting edge ideas and approaches to sociological issues. Indeed, if we did a longitudinal analysis of our journals—even the most prestigious ones—we would likely find that research happens in small steps not grand leaps. It is not surprising; Kuhn (1962) taught us long ago that paradigm shifts are the exception rather than the rule.

From my editorial perch, I see Kuhn's claims come alive every day. When dramatically new ideas come across the desk, some reviewers become excited and

[1] http://www.asanet.org/journals/asr/american_sociological_review.cfm
[2] http://www.press.uchicago.edu/ucp/journals/journal/ajs.html
[3] http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/%28ISSN%291573-7861/homepage/ProductInformation.html

argue strenuously for the paper's publication. However, most reviewers are likely to be skeptical rather than enthusiastic. Skepticism is, after all, the default mode of academic evaluation, (and science in general). We are trained to be hyper critical; we become particularly vigilant in the face of new ideas and especially critical of new interpretations of theory; we interrogate new methodologies with unusual vigor, and question new interpretations of data interactions and intersections; we are unapologetically leery of findings that question or disprove well accepted or well cited trends in a field.

Beyond training, certain structural constraints come into play. Journal reviewers are made aware with every solicitation that journal space is limited. This, perhaps inadvertently, creates unrealistic rules of competition and sets a bar that even truly innovative work may find hard to meet. As a result, innovative, cutting edge works—supposedly the publication goal of our journals—may not quickly (or ever) see the printed page. Case in point: While writing this article, I reached out to a few of the authors responsible for some of the most cited articles in the field.[4] These articles are now considered pathbreaking and important. However, those editing and reviewing the manuscripts for the first venues to which they were submitted apparently did see things quite that way. Articles such as DiMaggio and Powell's "The Iron Cage Revisited", Granovetter's "The Strength of Weak Ties", West and Zimmerman's "Doing Gender", or Meyer, Boli, Thomas and Ramirez's "World Society and the Nation-State" offer some prime examples.[5] Of course, each of these articles eventually made it to the pages of a top notch journal. But the articles did not ride the express train – there were stops along the way. Indeed each of the authors mentioned here reported difficult, sometime brutal reviews in response to their first submissions. It makes one wonder how many truly innovative works suffered the same or an even a sadder fate.

For all the idyllic calls for innovation, pathbreaking work has a tough road to hoe. Moreoever, these restrictive goals present an unlikely scenario in the increasingly complicated machinery of present-day academe. Contemporary scholars are working in one of the most competitive eras in memory (Bartkowski et al. 2015). Never has the "publish or perish" dictum rung so true. When I was in graduate school, for example, having one or two publications upon entry to the job market was the exception, not the norm. A vita boasting such a level of production greatly increased one's chances for a job interview at a Research 1 university. Now, having one to two publications upon entry to the job market is the expectation. Indeed, it is vital to getting a job at a Research 1 school, and increasingly, it also is becoming an important criterion at second tier institutions. Publication norms have escalated for tenure candidates as well. Article writers need longer lists of publications than they once did, and a larger percentage of their work must appear in top tier journals. Book writers are expected to have one book—possibly two—in print, (or, at the very least, a second very well developed project in the ready). This, along with a few journal articles is vital to a successful decision. Moreover, some universities

[4] James Moody used citation figures from Web of Science statistics and calculated a "top ten" citation list for sociology articles appearing in every decade from 1950 through 2010. The report is accessible at http://kieranhealy.org/blog/archives/2014/11/15/top-ten-by-decade/

[5] I am grateful to these authors for sharing their experiences with me and allowing me to report this information here.

now require the successful candidate to show evidence of being the future "go to" expert in their field and to demonstrate high citation counts—even in early phases of their careers.

Whether we readily verbalize it or not, the reality of academic publishing is as much about career building as it is about the cutting edge of knowledge. Knowing that, are the cultural ideals of publishing just too demanding?

Adjusting Cultural Ideals

Cultural realities rarely live up to cultural ideals, and academic publishing is no exception. Yet if we want our journals to maximize their value by generating reasonable growth in the field, the ideals of academic publishing may need an adjustment—one that more readily embraces conditions on the ground. Innovation and pathbreaking are critical to the growth of any field. But restricting our mission to these elements overlooks some of the very real needs that, in my estimation, should also inform the reasons why we publish. For example …

Replication

If cutting edge research is the goal of journal publishing, we leave little room for studies designed to replicate central findings of the field. Unlike the hard sciences or some branches of psychology where replication is demanded, sociology has never viewed that mission as central to publication (see e.g. Abbott 2007; Lucas et al. 2013; Wilson et al. 1973). This strikes me as an unfortunate and unproductive stance. Given that so much of what sociologists study addresses dynamic factors that are always in flux, replication could tell us much about the ways in which social and cultural phenomena change (or do not change) over time. I am frequently taken aback when I read about issues such as the changing lives of the elderly, fear of crime, gender construction and scripting, prejudice (both its prevalence and its forms of expression), occupational prestige, rates of domestic violence, etc. and find that we are building theories and conclusions based on data that may be 10, 20, even 30 years old. Often, such data has been collected and analyzed once and by only one set of researchers.

Of course, it is expensive to replicate findings garnered from national level or other large representative data sets. In addition, the variety of research methods (particular among those using highly sophisticated analytic strategies) and a general lack of data sharing and archiving present complications for replication as well (see e.g. Abbott 2007; Freese 2007). But perhaps funding agencies might be more apt to provide dollars for such work if our discipline attached greater value to the task and our journals gave replication a more central position. It is an issue that receives little attention in our discipline, but one that deserves more careful consideration.

Debate and Exchange

Intellectual growth emerges not only from new ideas and published findings but from healthy debate on existing theory, method and substance. National and regional

meetings allow for some of this activity. But the debates that go on in meeting rooms rarely make their way to the printed page. As such, few share in these stimulating intellectual discussions. The *American Journal of Sociology* claims that debate and exchange occur within the review process that surrounds submissions to their journal. The journal's mission statement tells us: "Although *AJS* publishes a very small percentage of the papers submitted to it, a double-blind review process is available to all qualified submissions, making the journal a center for exchange and debate "behind" the printed page and contributing to the robustness of social science research in general."[6] Unfortunately, as is the case for all journals, the only people involved in such exchanges are the authors, reviewers and journal editor. (One wonders how much more we could learn if journals had a mechanism for sharing these debates with their readers.)

I wish that more journals would publish debates and exchanges on a regular basis. In years gone by, the *American Sociological Review* would occasionally publish such discussions—many of them quite spirited! Recall the 1953 debates between Tumin and Davis on stratification; Parsons and Dubin's 1960 discussion of social acts; Cain, Watts and Coleman in their 1970 debates on education policy; Lenski and Schuman's 1971 exchanges on religious differences and the Protestant ethic; Imershein and Scheff's 1975 discussions of the nature of mental illness; Baron, Reiss, Phillips and Bollen debating the relationship between publicity and homicide rates in 1985; 1992 debates between Portes, Jensen, Sanders and Nee on ethnic enclaves, Hannan, Carroll, Baum and Powell's thoughts on legitimacy in 1995; Frank, Hironaka, Schofer and Buttel debating global environmentalism in 2000, etc. These exchanges are few and far between in the pages of our journals. Yet they offer us the chance to watch ideas questioned, rethought, or defended in real time, to walk along with those building or contesting knowledge as they work through their intellectual differences and scholarly allegiances. Such debates are as important to a field's growth and development as those innovative, cutting edge pieces we seek to publish. In fact, these debates and exchanges may be essential to producing cutting edge research.

I feel so strongly about the importance of such exchanges that, at *Sociological Forum,* we have made such interactions a regular feature of the journal. In "The Forum", a section that appears in each issue, we publish short essays and responses – "think pieces" that address everything from new theoretical and conceptual visions, to sociological interpretations of current events, to commentary on current sociological debates. In the issue following the exchange, we often publish readers' responses to the debate in "The Forum Mailbox". I believe that such exchanges draw more readers into a journal, making it a place that the journal's readers regularly consult when "checking the pulse" of the field. Open debate is good for any discipline and our journals should be committed to bringing such discussion to the foreground.

Translation and Transmission

During my years on the American Sociological Association's Publications Committee, members would often discuss sociology's seeming invisibility in the

[6] http://www.press.uchicago.edu/ucp/journals/journal/ajs.html

media when compared to the healthy presence of economics, political science and psychology. The association certainly works hard to turn that tide, but progress remains slow.

Whenever I chat with colleagues about this state of affairs, I hear one idea frequently forwarded. Some argue that sociology is more complicated than other social sciences. Truly informed explanations of social and cultural phenomena require a multivariate approach that explores simultaneous, layered influences on the phenomenon one is studying. Some protest that there is no easy way to explain such intricacies to those outside the field. For those reasons, many feel we must accept our invisibility.

The "it's complicated" explanation always leaves me dissatisfied. If you have ever taken an advanced economic course or designed a controlled psychological laboratory experiment, you must quickly admit that our field has no exclusive market on complexity. Yet, every day on television, radio, websites and blogs or in the newspapers, economists are translating and transmitting their research findings on global markets, labor issues, free trade, or inflation and psychologists are just as enthusiastically spreading their disciplines' findings on persuasion, anxiety, happiness, aggression, and more. If other social sciences are successfully translating and communicating their findings, making them comprehensible and relevant to those outside of particular specializations or broader disciplines, why is sociology lagging behind?

Our journals can help to remedy this problem, but we must expand our mission in three ways. First, we must concede that there is lots of news to be spread—not just the cutting edge breakthroughs. Updates on pressing social issues, reflections on cultural change, competing ways of interpretation, sociological debunking of conventional wisdom—all are issues worthy of our attention and our enthusiasm. Second, we must spread the news to a wider audience. In this regard, some journals are posting podcasts of selected forthcoming articles, with authors translating their research in ways less formal than the written page. Other journals are asking selected authors from certain issues to provide shorter, less jargonistic summaries of their work for posting on the journal website. Because sociology addresses issues of direct importance to policy makers, other social scientists, and the public at large, journals would do well to make translation and transmission part of the publishing mission. Finally, we must consider that our heavy emphasis on pathbreaking, cutting edge research may unnecessarily complicate the way in which we communicate our findings. In an effort to be original, to stand out from the pack, authors are becoming increasingly jargonistic, weighing down the field with endless new terminology that makes it nearly impossible for all but a small group of "insiders" to fully understand new arguments and results. Translation and simplification are important to a discipline's growth and our journals would do well to consider these important tasks.

Conclusion

Cutting edge, pathbreaking works are a must for any successful academic journal. But journals can and should frame their missions as so much more. Replication, debate and exchange, translation and transmission are, in my mind, equally important dimensions of a full intellectual life. Thus our journal mission statements, as well as our practices, may

need an adjustment of sorts—one that broadens our intellectual gaze and brings our publishing ideals and realities into a productive synchrony. Toward that end, I plan on adjusting *Sociological Forum*'s mission statement to meet these goals … care to join me?

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