Opening the Black Box of Editorship

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Yehuda Baruch

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The Role of Editing in Knowledge Development: Consensus Shifting and Consensus Creation

John R. Hollenbeck

> "You know, the Sheriff's got his problems too;
> he will surely take them out on you."
> —Warren Zevon ("Mohammed's Radio," 1976)

When I was first approached about writing this specific chapter, I must admit to being a little intimidated by the title I was asked to speak to – particularly because of its assumption that those who occupy editorial roles "develop knowledge." Even if some do, the thought that I may have ever done this in any of my editor or associate-editor roles is a claim or idea that I might have a hard time defending if pressed.

However, when I considered the formal definition of "knowledge" as provided by Webster's dictionary as "acquaintance with and understanding of a body of facts" and the definition of "fact" in Webster's as "an idea that is universally considered to be true" (Guralnik, 1972), then I got a little less defensive. If one divorces the words "knowledge" and "fact" from any kind of ultimately stable and unchanging truth with a capital "T," and instead views these terms as reflecting a valuable, but momentary universal consensus on ideas, then the role of the editor as knowledge developer becomes a little more visible – even as enacted by me.

Indeed, even a cursory review of much of the literature on the philosophy of science reveals the emphasis that science places on a consensus as a criterion, rather than the discovery of some form of ultimate truth. In defending the need for the scientific process, Charles Peirce wrote that "To satisfy all doubts, it is necessary that a method should be found by which our beliefs may be determined by nothing human, but some external permanency – by something upon which our thinking has no effect. The method must be such that *the ultimate conclusion of every person should be the same*. Such is the method of science" (Buchler, 1955). The history of science is often discussed in terms of revolutions that shift fields from one consensus to another (Kuhn, 1963), and the lack of consensus on basic ideas within a

scholarly area has been cited as a sign of disciplinary weakness and immaturity (Platt, 1964).

With this as a background, it is clear to me that an editor has an important role in the development of knowledge if one accepts a definition of knowledge that, at its core, relies on "consensus creation" and "consensus shifting". The editor's role is to make sure that each published article contributes to either increasing consensus about the validity and utility of some idea or changing the consensus away from one idea toward some other idea that everyone agrees is better. Consensus has to occur on many levels. At the most abstract level, it has to be clear how the manuscript being considered contributes to a higher level of consensus in the literature.

At a more practical level, it is also useful to form a consensus among reviewers, as well as between the reviewers and the authors. Obviously, achieving perfect consensus among these different parties is unlikely to be achieved. Still, all else equal, if the editor can provide value added in at least moving all the parties toward agreement, it is directly beneficial to everyone directly involved, as well as for the general health of the discipline. In the face of total lack of consensus among reviewers, and between reviewers and authors, it is impossible for decision making by an editor not to look arbitrary, political, or imperial. Thus, whereas it is clear that, in the end, the editor can and must sometimes make a unilateral decision without ever achieving any consensus, the more he or she can do to create consensus at this level the better. Since other chapters in the book are devoted to managing this aspect of the editor's job, this chapter will focus on the abstract side of consensus and what an editor might be able to contribute to knowledge development at the discipline level, operationalized in consensus terms.

On the practical side, reaction data to the editorial team by authors, whether it is directly solicited or just distributed through the "grapevine," will be immediate and affect the number and quality of submissions that the team will receive. On the abstract side, the contribution that the editorial team has made to their discipline will take longer to assess. If the editor is successful, the evidence for his or her having contributed to consensus will be provided by history in the form of citations for the articles he or she published. If an article is cited over 2,000 times (see Sternberg, 1992 for several examples of these), then there seems to be pretty good consensus that what was written in this article was important to a large number of people. If no one ever cites an article (not even a gratuitous self-citation by the original author), then what was written there has been judged by history – as has the person who decided to publish that work.

With this last statement in mind, it is critical to remember that, like the sheriff in Warren Zevon's "Mohammed's Radio," the editor "has his problems too." He or she is going to be judged by history in terms of how well

his or her decisions contributed to the knowledge base, in terms of creating or shifting consensus on ideas, and his or her journal is going to be ranked in terms of its prestige by how well it performs by this outcome, as operationalized in terms of citation counts. People who take on such time consuming, difficult, and uncompensated roles typically care deeply about their discipline and are achievement oriented. No one wants to see the impact of the journal he or she is stewarding on his or her discipline sink during his or her reign.

Hence, the imperial view of editors as being accountable to no one other than themselves is as inaccurate as it is unhelpful. Authors or reviewers would be better armed for success if they approach the editor as someone with a big problem on his or her hands; that is, how am I going to create or shift consensus with this manuscript so that I can raise or maintain the prestige of this journal and contribute to the discipline? As in any domain in life, if you understand people's problem and help them deal with it, you will be successful, and this also applies to people who wish to be accomplished authors or reviewers.

Thus, with these ideas in mind, the rest of this article will focus on what editors can do, at the abstract level, to be effective "consensus shifters" or "consensus creators". Although the focus that I was asked to take is on the leadership role of the editor in this process, obviously leadership can emerge from reviewers and authors as well, and in an ideal world, all parties involved should be striving to create consensus at the abstract level. Indeed, the more the focus of the review process can be kept on the level of abstract ideas, and away from the personalities involved, the more likely is it to obtain consensus at the practical level as well.

Although there are an infinite number of frames that can be used for manuscripts, in my experience, there are six very discernable and widely applied frames that are used for manuscripts in the applied organizational sciences. The relative strength of each of these frames is directly related to the motivation behind the manuscript and how the justification for the work is tied to an existing consensus. In the first section of this chapter, I will focus on two frames that focus on the current consensus and are very powerful. In the second section, I will focus on four less powerful frames that do not explicitly invoke a specific consensus as part of their justification. If authors present their work using either of the two frames mentioned in the first section, I believe they will have better long-term success in terms of publication outcomes and citations. If authors fail to use these frames, and instead invoke one of the four frames mentioned in the second section, editors or reviewers who can help reframe those works in consensus terms will have provided a value-added service in terms of increasing the impact that work has on the current stock of knowledge.

Framing the manuscript in consensus terms

Consensus shifting

The strongest frame for a paper is a frame that "shifts consensus." The frame for this type of paper was described most lucidly by Davis (1971). Davis (1971, p. 312) describes the frame for such a paper in these generic terms:

(1) The author articulates the taken for granted assumptions of the imagined audience by reviewing the literature ("It has long been thought that ...").
(2) The author adduces one or more propositions that deny what has been traditionally assumed ("But this is false ...").
(3) The author spends the body of the work "proving" by various devices that the old, routinely assumed propositions are wrong, while the new ones being asserted are right ("We have seen instead that ...").
(4) The author suggests the practical consequences of these new propositions for his imagined audience's ongoing research, specifically how they ought to deflect it unto new paths ("Future investigation is necessary to ...").

This frame is powerful because of it creates a sense of urgency. It is one thing to "not know something" and in a very real sense, in the applied organizational sciences, there is almost no limit to what we do not know. However, it is quite another to think one knows something, and then find out one is wrong. As Kuhn (1963) notes, "the prelude to much discovery and to all novel theory is not ignorance, but the recognition that something has gone wrong with the existing knowledge and beliefs" (p. 49). This conclusion is reiterated by Platt (1964), who notes more simply that the prelude to discovery is "error rather than confusion" (p. 350).

Space limitations preclude me from going into more detail, but for evidence of the strength of this frame, go to volume 112 of the 1992 edition of *Psychological Bulletin*, or more gratuitously, volume 51 of the 1998 edition of *Personnel Psychology* (the journal I was stewarding at that time), where authors of the most highly rated papers published in those outlets over the last several decades discuss their paper's historical contribution. In almost every case, even if the articles they wrote were not explicitly introduced with the frame described above, it is easy to see how their contribution could be expressed in these terms. If authors presented their papers in similar terms, their contribution would be easier for editors to detect. However, if the authors fail to do this, and if an editor can spin the frame in this direction, the contribution would have more impact, even if the manuscript is really only placing important boundary conditions on a well-accepted consensus (in terms of who, where, or when it holds).

Consensus creation

Another very powerful frame is one where the author uses the literature to show that there is currently a clear lack of consensus in the discipline regarding some important phenomenon. In this case, rather than demonstrating a consensus and then challenging it (or placing boundaries on it), the authors shows that there are two (or more) clear lines of discrepant thought simultaneously existing in the literature. As noted earlier, it is dangerous to think something is true when it is not, and hence, this grants urgency to studies that invoke the consensus shifting frame. The consensus creation frame generates urgency because lack of consensus is embarrassing. Lack of consensus within a discipline is a public advertisement, to external constituencies, that the discipline is immature, and it would be much better for those within the discipline to remain silent than to engage in a contentious, public, external debate regarding topics where well-intentioned and informed parties generally disagree.

In this context, what is needed is a vigorous internal debate in the professional literature, with the aim of shedding light (and not just heat) on the issue. Clearly, if an author can come along and shed such light with a manuscript that contributes meaningfully to ending the debate or restricting its boundaries, this would be highly valuable in terms of generating knowledge as defined here. If the author's paper is not framed this way, but could be, an editor who reframed it would make a value-added contribution.

A "close but not quite" variant of this frame is one where the author suggests something along the lines that "several papers have examined this relationship; half have found effects and half have not, so we are going to do it again." This is a much weaker frame for several reasons. First, in many cases, the inference that half have found it and half have not is based on an inappropriate overreliance on the "Statistical Hypothesis Inference Testing" paradigm, where effects not significant (n.s.) at the $p < 0.05$ level are treated as if the effects are zero (Cohen, 1994). With a sample of 80, the critical value for a correlation coefficient is 0.22. If three studies with this sample size obtained correlations of 0.21 (n.s.) and three obtained correlations of 0.22 ($p < 0.05$), it is not really legitimate to conclude that half the studies got it and half did not.

Even if one can show via a direct test (e.g., meta-analysis) that the obtained findings are actually different from each other, simply "piling on" another correlation, in and of itself, does little to create consensus. This paper can be converted into a genuine consensus creation paper only if the authors (either on their own or strongly encouraged by the editorial team) can explain exactly why there are two different sets of results and how these can all be reconciled if one takes "*X*" into consideration. If the three authors that failed to find the effect and the three authors that did find the effect were all in agreement about the effect after reading the manuscript under consideration (and by the way, two of them are probably reviewers), then this paper has real value as an exercise in consensus creation, and hence knowledge generation. This is especially the case if there were strongly held, long standing, and publicly declared positions on both sides, because this new manuscript will be instrumental in "putting this embarrassing incident behind us" (or at least placing boundaries on it). Internal debates within a discipline have real value in terms of highlighting where the knowledge base is weak, but their value is inversely related to how long they last.

Whereas "consensus creation" and "consensus shifting" frames are two of the most powerful, the next four frames to be discussed are less powerful. I believe this partially because of my editorial experience, but also because I have employed them myself as an author on one or more occasions to less than satisfactory effect. I think most active researchers have, at one point or another, invoked one or more of these frames because they are ubiquitous in the literature, and hence serve as legitimate models. Being a legitimate model, however, does not mean these are the best models, and I have come to the conclusion that the following four frames are less powerful relative to the two identified above. Hence, if an author or reviewer or editor could reframe these papers into more explicit consensus shifting or consensus creation, he or she would be helping to solve the editors' problem.

Reframing manuscripts in consensus terms

This has never been done before

One very common, but very weak, frame justifies the research by stating something of the form "this has never been done before." Few would accept the idea that "such and such has never been done before" as a legitimate reason for letting their teenage son or daughter do something, and this reluctance should generalize to one's responsibilities as editor. There are probably many good reasons why what the author is doing has never been done before, but even if there are not, it may be very difficult to link this outlier manuscript to any existing consensus in the literature. Thus, the paper is unlikely to either promote greater consensus or shift the consensus because it never comes directly in contact with any consensus.

The reviewers or the editor may be able to help the author if some case could be made that the reason that "this was never been done before" is because it flies in the face of some consensus that clearly states it cannot or should not be done. This could potentially convert the paper into a "consensus shifting" paper, which as noted below can be a powerful frame. It would take a great deal more effort on the part of someone (author, reviewers, or editors) to establish exactly why what is being proposed flies in the face of the existing consensus (and that may not even be possible), and this is unlikely to be accomplished with a single round of revision.

This frame becomes particularly weak, and harder to save, when it is invoked with a very narrow interpretation of what "this" is. In my experience,

most of the time, the "this has never been done before" frame was invoked; one or more of the reviewers were able to directly contradict the authors by showing that "this" had indeed been done before. That is, previous studies had linked the same independent variable, dependent variable, mediator and/or moderators. The author would often come back and say, "yes but not with a sample like this (workers from Eastern Europe!) or a task context like this (Emergency Medical Technicians [EMTs]!) or at a time like this (after 9/11!)."

Generally, if there was a compelling theoretical reason why the nature of the sample, task or time made it highly plausible that "what everyone believes is true is actually false with some people, some tasks or at some times," then this might again be converted into a meaningful "consensus shifting" frame by the editorial team. However, the conceptual reason would have to be compelling and it might also require data collected from both this "new" context (sample, task or time), with data from more "traditional" contexts (samples, tasks, and times) to refute alternative conceptual or methodological reasons for differences between this new context and all the existing contexts.

And yes, there need to be differences in results between this context and traditional contexts or else this is straight replication, which is valuable, but not urgent in the eyes of most editors. No two contexts are exactly alike, and hence there is no end to this for an editor that accepts a narrow definition of "this" along with a "this has never been done before" frame as sufficient justification to publish a paper. It will not be viewed as generating new knowledge nor will it generate a large number of future citations – which of course, is a problem for the editor.

Filling a gap

A slight variation on the "This has never been done before" frame is the "Filling a gap" frame. This is a variant in the sense that the author recognizes that someone has done "this," and someone has done "that," but no one has done both "this and that" at the same time. This frame shares many of the same limitations of the frame that preceded it, in terms of (a) there may be good reasons why "this and that" have never been done at the same time and (b) defining "this and that" too narrowly may not be possible. However, if these limitations can be overcome, this frame is slightly stronger. The key to this frame is the relationship between "this and that."

If the consensus is "this and that" have well-known effects, and that they are largely independent (and hence no reason to expect anything other than additive effects), then this reverts to an act or pure replication. This is consensus-confirming research, and as noted earlier, this is valuable, but less urgent relative to consensus-shifting or consensus-creation research in terms of generating new knowledge and impact. Moreover, the number of "gaps" in the literature, if defined this way, is very large, and an editor would quickly run out of space if he or she treated this type of spackle work as equivalent in terms of knowledge generation relative to consensus-creation or consensus-shifting research.

Fortunately, under certain conditions, it is often possible to convert this frame into one of these two other frames. First, if "this and that" are potentially negatively related or in some way inconsistent in conceptualization or in implications for practice, then this frame can be potentially converted in a consensus-creation frame. That is, if one can make a compelling case that "this and that" cannot both be true, and yet this has not been recognized in the literature, then the stage is set for consensus creation. Second, if "this and that" have interactive, rather than additive effects, then the stage is set for consensus-shifting research. That is, if one can argue that "it is generally believed that 'this' has certain effects, but this is not true when 'that' is high or low," then the current consensus has effectively been refined and bounded more definitively (although not necessarily shifted a great deal).

Why ask why why?

Bacharach (1989) has noted that at the core of all strong theories is an explanation of "why" two variables are related or "why" a particular cause leads to a specific effect. Given this, it should not be surprising that someone might frame a paper in generic terms such as "Although everyone knows that this and that are related, no one has ever been establish *why* this is the case," and this is a common frame. Although expressed in consensus terms, authors that invoke this frame are directly claiming right from the start that consensus creation has already been accomplished, and they have no intention of shifting it. Instead, their goal is to more fully elucidate it.

This frame is particularly weak if (a) there is one single mediator that has been implied but never directly tested, or (b) if no mediator has ever been proposed, but the one tested here is the most obvious. In both of these cases, the paper is likely to confirm that what everyone thinks is true, is in fact true. There is some value in this as an extended replication, but what is learned from this does not really create a sense of urgency for a would-be publisher.

This frame is also weak when one moves beyond the first level of mediation and asks, "why, why?" That is, when the frame becomes "everyone knows A leads to C because of B, but *why* does A lead to B?" Now, the authors are suggesting that not only is there consensus, but that this consensus is already pretty well elucidated. Cook and Campbell (1979) refer to this type of second, third, or higher order mediation question as "micro-mediation," and they show that this can go on forever. In the end, what is learned from it never really changes the basic reality that if you need to control C, all you really need to worry about is A. Particularly in applied contexts, when research goes beyond the first level of mediation, one starts

to hear complaints from practice-oriented reviewers that the paper is too academic.

This frame becomes more powerful, on the other hand, if the authors can make the case (or the editors or reviewers can induce the authors to make the case) that the literature has proposed alterative reasons "why" *A* leads to *C*, and that these may not be compatible. Thus, although there is consensus about the *A*-*C* relationship, there is a clear lack of consensus about why this is the case, and thus, this has now been framed in "consensus creation" terms at a different level. This frame also becomes more powerful if the mediators being tested have strong implications for helping uncover future moderators. That is, if one knows the exact and precise reason why *A* leads to *C* (i.e., *B*), it may be easier to imagine contexts where *A* may not lead to *C* because in these contexts, *B* is not possible, or *B* is not caused by *A*, or *B* may not cause *C*. This at least sets the stage for "consensus shifting" research where the well-known relationship between *A* and *C* turns out not to hold after all because of contingencies associated with *B*.

Linear problem solving

In many applied areas of science, research questions are driven by the need to solve real-world problems. When that is the case, solving the problem becomes the justification for conducting the research. The frame that is set for such research follows a form where (1) some important problem is introduced, (2) the lack of solution to the problem is established, (3) the existing literature base or knowledge base is reviewed for potential solutions, (4) those solutions that seem most relevant or applicable are invoked, and (5) the results of that are reported, more often than not – resulting in a happy ending.

Both knowledge generation and problem solving are good things, but unfortunately, they are not necessarily the same thing. When the problem is used to justify the research, the theory and the hypotheses become "problem driven," and not necessarily "knowledge driven." Indeed, Weick (1989) has noted that "most descriptions of theory construction sound very much like conventional linear descriptions of problem solving which is unfortunate ... when theory building is modeled after linear problem solving, the outcomes are unremarkable" (p. 519).

The reason for this is that good problem solving, for obvious reasons, more often than not tries to *leverage* the existing knowledge base, not *extend* it. That is, the most logical steps to take when solving the problem are those steps for which there is a strong consensus that the steps will work, and it would seem odd (if not unethical) to try something controversial or unproven in any context where there was some consensually approved alternative. Authors will sometimes try to suggest that the existing knowledge base says absolutely nothing about the problem that they are trying to

solve, but that is usually only true in a very narrow sense (i.e., "no one has tried to improve personnel selection outcomes with Eastern European EMTs after 9/11). When people speak of the need for close ties between researchers and practitioners, the most important thing that researchers bring to that relationship, in my opinion, would be a recommendation about what should be done in this specific context given the current consensus. This maximizes the practitioner's likelihood of success, as well as the defensibility of what the practitioner did if it turns out the problem was not solved.

Paradoxically, the potential contribution of the linear problem-solving frame to knowledge generation is inversely related to the success of the problem-solving effort. When all works out well, then the research is totally knowledge confirming, and more likely than not, replicates past studies (although perhaps in a different context). The potential for knowledge generation is highest when all hell breaks loose. When nothing that was promised by the existing knowledge base actually works when invoked in this specific context, then this sets the stage for consensus shifting, because some aspect of the sample, task, or time is serving as boundary condition on what is known.

Again, the prelude to new discovery is not ignorance, but rather something that we all truly believe in has gone terribly, terribly wrong. Even when things do not go terribly wrong, unforeseen problems in implementing consensus-based practices often call for more refined levels of consensus. What might be serendipitously learned in the aftermath of these events could have critical implications for extending the knowledge base. When people speak of the need for close ties between researchers and practitioners, this is the most important thing that practitioners bring to the relationship, in my opinion.

Finally, for the record (i.e., so that I am not quoted out of context), let me directly reiterate that problem solving is a good thing, and I am not saying that knowledge generation should be given a higher priority than problem solving. If my doctor follows all of the textbook protocols and cures me of some malady, this is a good thing for me. However, he or she may not have generated any new knowledge in the process, and although my problem has been solved, my doctor has *not solved the problem* of the editor of some prestigious medical journal. If my doctor wants to ignore the textbook protocols and try out some new and unproven procedure on me, in the hope of generating new knowledge, this may or may not be good for me. On the other hand, the editor of a prestigious journal might be curious about how this new and unusual treatment works out for me, and not because we are close friends. Alternatively, if my doctor goes through all the textbook protocols and all hell breaks loose – this is definitely bad for me – but the editor of a prestigious medical journal may want to "stop the presses" and rush off and publish my case. The editor of a prestigious medical journal, like the sheriff, has his problems too.

Implications for authors, reviewers, and editors

If, like many philosophers of science, one accepts a definition of "knowledge" that is expressed in terms of a momentary, but valuable universal consensus about ideas, then manuscripts that are cleanly framed in consensus terms have the clearest potential for impact and knowledge development. In particular, manuscripts that explicitly induce a "consensus shifting" or "consensus creation" frame can be powerful in terms of generating a sense of urgency with respect to their publication and eventual citation.

There are many other potential frames an author could employ, and four specific frames that are widely seen in the applied organizational sciences that are less powerful in the sense of creating a sense of urgency, were identified here. The implication that this has for authors, reviewers, and editors is basically the same, in the sense that if any one of these parties can convert a manuscript that starts out with a less powerful frame into a more powerful consensus-shifting or consensus-creation frame, the better it would be for all parties. Many specific ways of making this conversion were presented in this paper, and anyone who can take the lead in reframing such papers is consensus terms helps promote a win-win-win situation for the authors, the editor, and the journal in terms of maximizing the potential impact that the article has on the knowledge base.

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3

How May I Help You? Editing as Service

Ann Marie Ryan

A reductionist view of the role of an editor would be that it is but a series of service transactions – receive a manuscript, assign reviewers, read the manuscript, read the reviews, write a decision letter, pick up the next one and repeat the process. Lest the reader be horrified that as an editor I have viewed my decision letters as no more than hamburgers at a fast food drive-through (and you are probably grumbling about applying the word "fast" to editorial decisions), let me elaborate on why applying a service lens to the editor's role is appropriate and useful.

Service on the part of editors is integral to the continued vitality of the peer review process. Priem and Rasheed (2006) noted that reviewing is an "invisible service"; in contrast, the role of an editor is quite a visible one as the name authors associate with an acceptance or rejection is the editor's. The "service provider" that is directly identifiable to those seeking to publish is the editor. Further, editing is a professional service that is quite involving in terms of time and effort commitment relative to many other forms of voluntary professional activities.

In this chapter, I discuss different ways of considering editing as a service role, drawing upon literature on volunteerism to highlight why individuals might choose to serve the profession in this way, and the literatures on organizational citizenship, customer service, and servant leadership to discuss the nature of service provided by editors. Throughout, ways in which editors should and should not adopt a service orientation to the task of editing are highlighted. Finally, I end with brief advice to both the person and the profession on how to better cultivate editors and to cultivate better editors.

Editing as sustained volunteerism

The literature on sustained volunteerism addresses why individuals choose to take on and remain in roles that require "long-term, planned, prosocial behaviors that benefit strangers and occur within an organizational setting" (p. 448; Penner, 2002). The editor's role can be characterized as one of sustained