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PUBLISHING PERILS, AND HOW TO SURVIVE THEM: A GUIDE FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS

Abstract

As the corporatization of universities worldwide proceeds, the opportunity gap is widening between students pursuing a research career from environments already rich in professional expertise, and students left to work out the rules for themselves. This article is a basic introduction to the practicalities of getting published in academic journals. After discussing why and how journals matter, it describes the three main types of publication that students will encounter: community-oriented magazines, refereed accrediting journals, and board-reviewed 'project' journals; suggests how best to approach them, and explains the rewards and drawbacks of each.

Keywords

graduate education; academic publishing; education industry; professionalism; refereeing; rhetoric

A word of warning

IN 1995, THE Graduate Centre of the University of Melbourne asked me to give a talk about publishing at a vocational conference for students 'involved in all aspects of journal production'.¹ I was very grateful to the organizers of *Publish or Be Damned!* for inviting me to fulfil an old wish. For years, I've been muttering about the need for humanities faculties and centres in Australian universities to run self-promotion seminars for aspiring research academics. 'Self-promotion' can be a harsh word. However, as the ideal of a tenured life of leisurely

contemplation fades into the past, it is crucial for universities to admit that practical skills are required to negotiate the world of competitive research, and that most of these skills can be taught and learned. If we fail to admit this, allowing students to expect that academic merit alone will succeed, then we help to foster an invisible elitism, charisma based, favouring those who 'just know' what the right thing to do might be — or who have family, friends and experienced or influential advisers to help them.

A word of warning to begin with: the following guide is oriented towards students who are new to academic publishing or are working in institutional contexts where experience and influence in these matters may be in short supply, so it will be too basic for some readers. It does not deal, for example, with the tricky rhetorical problems that getting published 'internationally' can pose for scholars writing in English but working outside the US or, in some instances, Britain (Morris and Muecke, 1995: 1–3). Nor does it deal in detail with the profound changes in intellectual agenda setting (of which the shift from 'criticism' to 'research' is but a symptom) that follow when work in the humanities is judged by funding and assessment criteria initially developed for the sciences. Nevertheless, beginning from basics is the only way to help students reach a position where such problems may arise, and many excellent teachers are not easily able to do so when the academy in which they themselves were trained is vanishing around them.

In countries where the corporatization of higher education² has entailed not only a proliferation of new institutions and interdisciplinary programmes (not always well funded or resourced), but also the reformatting of a once distinctive culture of state or 'public' education to mimic what is taken by reformers to be an American competitive ideal, universities are struggling to emerge from a period of great upheaval and rapid professionalization. In Australia the Oxbridge-derived model of what it meant to be a scholar, still dominant when I was a student, has definitively gone. Being brilliant but lazy, or learned but light in publications, is not a career option any more.

It seems likely that in future, research in the humanities as well as the sciences will be increasingly the province of specialists at 'research' — academics willing and able to sacrifice job security in exchange for the time to read, think and write. Under these conditions, the business of funding your research, even simply making a living, takes more than an aptitude for scholarship. You also need networking and budgeting skills, grant, application and CV-writing skills, telephone skills and even, in some circumstances, skills at 'doing lunch'. Above all, first and foremost, you need to know how to publish.

The rapidity of these changes has left many of us embarrassed about how to name them ('self-promotion', for example, sounds cynical) and this in itself can be disabling. So I focus here on two basic realities of journal publication: first, why writing for journals is worthwhile for students; second, what kinds of journal you can approach, and how.

Why do journals matter?

When I began thinking about this question, most of the answers I came up with resembled the contorted explanations I was given in the 1960s for studying Latin at high school. The real reason for doing so was that when I started high school (though not by the time I had finished), Latin was compulsory for entry to Sydney University – or at least, my family thought so. Perhaps they were wrong. Either way, Latin was seen as a gateway to the university, and I simply had to go through it.

Rarely was this spelled out. Instead, I was given a range of creative incentives: Latin helps you to learn French and Italian more easily (as though anyone who could handle Latin, as it was taught in those days, would have trouble taking French or Italian straight); Latin helps you to decode the labels on medicine bottles and to feel comfortable with the botanical names of plants; Latin gives you 'a tidy mind'. Years later, I realized that this last explanation was the best one, if 'a tidy mind' is taken as a euphemism for an intellectual killer instinct for solving seemingly intractable problems. I may have forgotten all my Latin, but reciting Cicero in the backyard at dawn while my friends went surfing and my grandmother fed the chooks taught me a lot about facing the irrational and unintelligible with equanimity.

So, too, there are many broad or displaced 'good reasons' for getting involved in journal publishing, many ways in which doing so will help you in whatever career or profession you eventually take up. The main reason, however, is the direct one. Journal publication is a gateway to the research academy. It isn't just a matter of accumulating CV items, although that is now as crucial an activity as completing a Ph.D. and it is disingenuous and foolish to treat it with contempt. Writing for and publishing journals is also a way to learn, in a contained environment, the basics of professional academic life – the social procedures, the protocols, the routine psychological and political conflicts as well as the ethical issues. It is also the best way to find out where the famous 'cutting edge' of your discipline really is, and to begin to have a say in defining it. This means that the first step towards writing for scholarly journals is to acquire the habit of reading them.

Why is this worthwhile? Many people wonder whether print journals have a future; they are perhaps more expensive to produce, and certainly much harder to sell, than ever before. Libraries facing funding cuts and storage difficulties are reluctant to maintain their journal holdings, let alone enlarge their subscription list. Clearly, the future for scholarly journals in general is electronic, and this is already affecting the very nature of journals and the uses we make of them.

Nevertheless, the journal *form* (as distinct from the journal object) will probably maintain its importance in the years to come, all the more so as it becomes easier to locate and order the items – whether articles or whole issues – that concern you. Alongside the rapid growth of electronic journals, it is possible to

browse through the holdings of a journal 'library' like CARL Uncover, have CARL e-mail you the contents of new issues of your favourite journals as soon as they appear, and have a copy of an article faxed to you in less time than it takes to go to your local inter-library loan facility.

The basic unit of the scholarly journal is still the article or essay, and for most of us the real question is not 'why journals?' but 'why articles?' Some people say that writing articles is a waste of time, that it's better just to write books. I think this is bad advice. New scholars need to do both. Journals are a good way, and may soon be the only way, for new scholars to become 'known', to develop a reputation as well as a CV. Journals are also a good way, and may soon be the only way, for new scholars to have a chance of reshaping their disciplines and of influencing the research agenda in their fields of study.

Let's begin at the most practical level – surviving as a researcher, and having some power to shape your future. The fact is that your prospects later in life may depend on having a convincing number of refereed journal publications on your CV. There are still ways around this in humanities-related areas; respect for the unusual path and for a broad range of achievements can sometimes carry the day, although it may take a long time to do so. It is also true that for graduate students the time when the issue of 'refereed articles' will arise as crucial is usually a long way off; but sooner or later the moment will come when a selection committee will start counting your refereed articles and comparing them to those of other candidates. All other things being equal (as they very rarely are), the candidate with three books and thirty articles is often in a stronger position than the candidate with four books and five articles, because of the esteem in which refereed articles are held. More to the point (when it comes to institutional realities), candidates without a strong showing in refereed journals are more vulnerable to selectors who want to block them for some other reason, which they then may not need to elaborate.

Journal publishing, then, is a formal requirement of a research career. A less straightforward but equally important reason for writing articles is that these days, book publishing does not alone suffice as a way to ensure that your work will be *read* by other practitioners of your discipline, let alone by other members of your profession. As in many other areas of academic life, the obscure mysteries of personal 'reputation' are here entangled with structural problems of power in the university and in publishing. How to become 'known', and how to have a say in what happens to the field, are overlapping, though not identical, issues.

Consider the changes in academic publishing over the past fifteen years. There was a time when academic books were published by heavily subsidized university presses and a few commercial publishers prepared to carry a prestige list at a loss. This system materially sustained the ethos of 'knowledge as intrinsically valuable'; a good book, containing original thought and research, carefully reviewed by experts and duly revised (often several times) for publication, could usually expect to find a home irrespective of its chances of making money. This

is no longer the case. By the end of the 1980s, academic publishing was an industry dominated by a few transnational corporations (Routledge is the best known) and a smallish number of large university presses either forced to live without subsidy, or drawing up plans to do so. Exceptions, like small presses, do remain. On the whole, most academic publishers are increasingly expected to be self-sustaining, and therefore to make a profit.

This changes the whole ethos of scholarly publishing. The 'Routledge' model has had a huge impact in diversifying the range of topics and approaches that academics can respectably take up, and in democratizing, to some extent, the market for academic books; for example, cultural studies books ideally may appeal to non-academic readers. On the other hand, this same model, variously adapted or modified, can involve a sacrifice at the level of editing and revision, which is often left largely to authors by some presses; intense pressure on new authors to invent fashionable, saleable topics which may have a short academic life once saturation point is reached in the market; and a tendency to pump out vast numbers of books while giving any one title only a few months to succeed before pulling it (or even pulping it) from the list.

The first two developments are survivable. For every academic milieu that regards a 'fashionable' product with disdain, there are now at least two more that value its public appeal and sense of social engagement. The last feature of the model – short distribution periods – is very dangerous for authors, especially for those working far from the conference circuits that give 'visibility' to new scholars in the US and Europe.

It means you can publish a book that few people – least of all the hyper-busy senior scholars whose decisions affect your career – may ever see before it disappears. Your book may be unobtainable by the time the slow machinery of academic reviewing has passed word out through the journals, two or three years later, that your work is important. This means that you are dependent on the quality and duration of your publisher's commitment to promoting you and your title, and this in turn means that the 'star' system in the academy today is not a by-product of our shallow, egotistical personalities but a structural feature of the publishing and research industry.

Most quality university presses still offer relief from these pressures; editing and revision are valued, areas of research that are rarely big sellers – such as textual criticism, fact-laden modes of social and economic history, educational theory – are more or less maintained, and books may have years rather than months to 'find a market'. Still, the combined effects of globalization and rationalization are taking their toll. For many publishers, sustaining the operation overall means selling as many titles as possible to as big a market as possible as often as possible. This is one reason why we have seen a huge growth in textbooks, primers and 'Introductions' on the one hand, and in giant anthologies (sometimes called 'doorstoppers') on fashionable topics on the other.

Primers can compete for the vast undergraduate textbook market in the US

and/or its much smaller (but, for us, relatively large) equivalent in Australia. Doorstoppers may also do that, and/or compete for use in graduate schools, and/or bundle together a number of niche markets, not all of them academic, across several English-reading countries – hence the attraction of blockbuster readers focusing on race, gender, sexuality, postcolonialism and multiculturalism. Given the wide social dispersal of interest in these topics, the prevalence of readers about them is not just a product of community pressure, or baby boomer power in the academy. Nor is it a political-correctness conspiracy. It is a commercial solution to a problem of supply and demand.

Taken together, these two publishing models define a difficult future for the budding academic author. I'll mention just two problems to consider, one to do with personal aspirations and the other with the dynamics of the profession, in order to say why I think that journals offer a provisional solution in each case.

First, part of the art of reputation lies in having your work included in other people's footnotes and bibliographies. This is one of those facts of academic life that embarrasses people: thinking about your reputation is shameful, like checking the footnotes to a text you haven't read. Well, as an untenured academic writer I live on my 'name', and I often check footnotes first. Footnotes attract your attention to new work as well as telling you about the circulation of your own; they are an intellectual map of the text you're about to read. Reputation is partly a matter of getting on to that map. While it is utterly self-destructive (really, it is) to put building a reputation before pleasure and integrity in your work, it is disingenuous and foolish to ignore it. Successful job, research grant and promotion applications all depend on being able to secure an ever larger number of testimonials from other scholars, some of whom, in competitive situations, will know you *only* by 'reputation'.

So beyond securing a contract with a publisher lies the more difficult task of having your book actually read, used and cited by other scholars. For this to happen in the economy of over-production we face now, it isn't enough that your book should be excellent. If scholars worldwide are not already reaching for your latest instant classic, there has to be some reason for your book to stand out in shops and catalogues from the dozens, perhaps hundreds of similar titles on closely related topics pouring out of Routledge, Duke, Minnesota, Cambridge, Oxford, Verso, Indiana, and Allen & Unwin. A good title, subtitle and book design helps. Mostly, I'm afraid, potential readers will be looking at your name.

How do you get a name? As I suggested before, giving papers at your discipline's annual convention, at special thematic conferences, and at large international marketplaces like the MLA, is one very important way. Equally important, and much cheaper, is publishing related essays and even fragments of your book across a variety of journals. There are many benefits to this. Senior scholars do tend to be obsessive about their patch; they check journals assiduously, monitoring new developments when they no longer have time to read books. Ambitious and/or passionate 'emerging' scholars read journals to gauge

the competition and to ensure that their own bibliographies are comprehensive and up to date.

Through this process, however sordidly pragmatic it may seem, you begin to acquire a readership, and thus, as letters and invitations begin to appear in response from strangers, a sense of professional belonging. People begin to make comments that are actually helpful to your work; sooner or later they start to quote your article. And this increases the chances that when your book finally takes its place on the shelves along with all the others, tiny bells will ring for shopping academics.

The second problem in publishing that journals can address is to do with intellectual innovation and generational power in the academy. I recently asked a senior editor where innovation might come from in a world of textbooks and doorstoppers. She answered, unequivocally, 'journals'. Both the writing of introductions and the compiling of anthologies are crucial academic activities; the profession could not survive without them. However, it is hard to imagine a vibrant future for academic books, or even academic life, should these become the dominant forms of publishing. Introductions rarely 'introduce' something new; they usually reinterpret and render accessible an existing area of work. Anthologies may include eccentric materials and foreground new voices; the essays are often drawn, in fact, from journals. But for a publisher to risk assembling a huge, unwieldy volume on a relatively specialized topic, the theme of the anthology needs to be saleable and safe. Hence the rhetorical sameness of all those readers on difference, and the conceptual homogeneity of most readers on multi-culturalism.

Of course, publishers rarely order you to confine yourself to these forms. They will say that your excellent book on an unusual theme sadly 'doesn't have a market'. This usually means that they can find no one who teaches a course with a similar title to your book, or who expresses interest in ordering it for inclusion on a reading list. As teachers, we tend to order books with which we are already familiar, or new books and anthologies in areas that we already know. Something that doesn't quite fit the prevailing map is not really viable for most teaching purposes. Under the old dispensation, that did not prevent creative scholarship from being published and from staying in print. In the future, it may. It is already quite hard to publish anything original or heterodox in cultural studies, in this as in many other unheroic but significant worldly respects the 'cutting edge' of the humanities.

In this situation, journals are increasingly important as the places where new people can soften, as it were, the ground for change. No single essay in an issue, no one issue in a volume, ordinarily bears all the responsibility for the economic future of the project. If, as Tani Barlow (1995) predicts, journals melt quite soon into databases, this relative liberty of the individual item is not immediately likely to disappear.¹

Which journals matter, and how?

There are broadly three kinds of journal for humanities researchers to consider: (1) the worldview-promoting journal that creates its own community (Australian examples are *Meanjin*, *Arena* and *Eureka Street*); (2) the well-established, refereed journal that accredits for a discipline or field (*Cultural Studies*, *Australian Historical Studies*, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*); (3) the special purpose or project-oriented journal created to make room for and legitimize a particular activity or perspective (*The Australian Feminist Law Journal*, *GLQ*, *The UTS Review*).

1 Community-creating journals

Journals like *Eureka Street* and *Arena* (progressive Catholic and post-Marxist publications respectively) are mini-public spheres, in which quite diverse people, including academics, interact. The circulation of any one of these may be small, from a few hundred to a couple of thousand copies (roughly the same, in fact, as the average academic book). Their power lies in the ways in which they connect to other media, including newspapers (by which their materials are sometimes reprinted), and the very mixed readership they attract. Spreading opinion through overlapping and interconnecting networks rather than accumulating a mass readership of their own, these journals can exert an influence that is wonderfully disproportionate to their size.

We hear much breast beating these days about the difficulties academics have with the media, and a supposed decline of the public intellectual ethos in an age of specialization. Community journals offer a relatively open and painless way for the most retiring scholar to go public. While there are far fewer of them now than in the past, as much because energy has passed on to zines and the Internet as because economic pressure has forced many journals to close, those that survive provide a bridge, quite directly, between the academy and the mainstream media (there are always journalists who read them), and they create pathways between many smaller interest groups. People who bemoan the good old days of the public intellectual (in historical practice, a leisured white gentleman) forget that a public is no longer the same thing as a mass market, let alone a homogenous milieu composed of bearers of a common culture. A 'general' public is a network, potentially infinite, of specialists – some academic, some not, some professional, some not, some forming larger social groups and some, constituencies of one. A community journal is a gateway to that network.

Despite all the breast beating, not much credit actually accrues, in our system, to the 'public' academic – unless he or she also has substantial professional qualifications. So it is fair for a new researcher to ask: what's in it for me? Well, apart from helping you to become known (and to a degree that you should not underestimate), publishing in community journals will give you two kinds of experience.

One is in learning to deal with the mismatch between your own passions and obsessions and those driving the rest of the world. To acquire an acute and relaxed sensitivity to the relative unimportance of your immediate interests in the wider scheme of things is advantageous to a researcher; as well as helping you to formulate problems that don't just surge from your unconscious, it will teach you to *frame* your projects in more sociable, realistic and thus potentially effective ways.

The other experience that working with community journals provides is perhaps a more technical version of the same thing. It forces you to learn to negotiate other, even alien worlds of discourse; it will help you to become 'multi-lingual' as an academic writer. Having a deep, practical knowledge of what it means to speak *differently with* (not for or to) different people in different contexts is more than a first step in being able to 'find' a decent readership. It is a way of acquiring the ability to create networks of discussion, to *form* those relationships that constitute a public.

In my view, this is the only sensible solution to the problem of jargon in cultural studies. The difficulty is not that we use jargon in our specialist journals and papers, unless we use it badly. Nor is it really that some of us expect newspapers and magazines to publish slabs of it in the letters column, or late night talk show hosts to croon it on public radio. The difficulty is that many of us forget how to tell the difference between our jargon and someone else's, or we simply never learn where our jargon begins and ends; and then, faced with recalcitrance to our talk of incommensurability, counter-hegemony and the play of the differend, we respond with the only other language we remember: baby talk; we abandon our knowledge and patronize our public. Whereas what we should do is learn to translate, as many of us do between varieties of English in everyday life – and that means learning *as academics* to use other social languages with grace, complexity and skill.

Writing for a community journal is one of the best ways to acquire what is becoming an increasingly vital capacity for translation; in this respect, the stylistic conservatism, simplicity and sobriety favoured by many such journals makes them an excellent training ground. For it isn't just a matter of learning, as an academic, to 'face' the media. As universities grow larger and more complex, it will be crucial for humanities researchers in future not only to know how to serve diverse publics if we wish to, but how to translate our interests effectively when necessary for other scholars, bureaucrats, benefactors and business people who know nothing about what we do and will need a reason to care.

2 Refereed journals

At the other end of the spectrum are the journals that administer what can count as a proper contribution to a discipline. Publishing in refereed journals has long been crucial in the soft as well as the hard sciences, and, even though the whole

notion of 'refereeing' is a contentious one, it is rapidly becoming crucial in the humanities as well.

What is refereeing? Humanities journals follow two basic models. The purer and more respectable model, science based, is 'double blind review', where your manuscript is sent out minus your name and address to readers (the number may vary) who write reports that will be forwarded to you as anonymous. In the second model, widely used in practice and often called 'peer review' in the hope of fooling scientists on committees, the author's name and location is supplied to the referees (thus providing basic information about gender, ethnicity, national context, etc. as the author wants these represented) but the referees remain anonymous.

Anonymous texts are funny things. There are powerful arguments for refereeing as a way to secure fairness in a hierarchical profession.⁴ Nevertheless, paranoia haunts the system. Most of us play guessing-games, especially in a small society such as Australia's, and the danger of having an insane or eventually embarrassing over-reaction to a nameless piece of text is ever present for referees. Blind review was not designed for the rules of evidence and the criteria of evaluation that most humanities scholars actually use, working as we do in areas of speculative inquiry concerned with opinions and emotions. Anonymous reviews can be unfair and very harsh, so the immediate practical issue posed by refereed journals to new researchers is how to approach them effectively.

My main piece of advice is so basic it may sound trivial: USE YOUR SPELLCHECK and, if you have even the tiniest worries about your grammar and punctuation, use a grammar check as well. Then check your manuscript at least once more for those lucid mistakes (for example, 'it's' for 'its') that your computer can't pick up. Never let a manuscript go until it's as perfect as you can make it. There will always be typos and slips remaining for copy-editors to correct. The real point of checking, however, is to let the referees know you did it.

The whole issue of 'literacy', and what it means for whom, is a fraught one, I know. But let me leave aside the big debates about the causes, the validity and the future of the current malaise about literacy levels and the power-laden concept of 'standards' in higher education, and just focus on what actually happens when your manuscript reaches me, or someone like me, for refereeing.

The truth is – I don't really want to read your article. I *really* don't want to read it. It's one of a dozen nameless texts that I have sitting on my desk, and refereeing is one of more than a dozen demanding chores I'm supposed to handle regularly while producing competitive research myself. I can't do all the things I need to get through in a day; it isn't possible. I'm only reading your article now because the editor has rung me up, saying 'For God's sake! You've had it for weeks! This person is still waiting!' So I feel guilty, and that makes me cranky. I'll have to ring my own editor to admit that I'm going to miss another deadline. So I feel anxious, and that makes me even more cranky.

So if I can tell, within the first two or three pages, that you haven't checked

