



Reflections on Publications and the ISA

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The post of ISA Vice-President for Publications (VP) is not, as one might expect, closely engaged with the intellectual details of the publications; it is their editors who are responsible for those, while the VP’s duty is to promote the conditions that support their work. It has to be said, too, that for ISA as a whole the journals’ intellectual function is by no means their only one: as is the case for many learned societies, around half of the association’s total income comes from its publications, so it is vital to work to maintain and improve that. Readers will not be surprised to hear that those two duties can sometimes conflict. I have learned a lot during my four years of office, and take this opportunity to share some of that with readers. Below, some of the behind-the-scenes issues that arise to be dealt with are sketched.

In the market place

The recent period has been one of worldwide upheaval in the publishing system, arising from the ‘Open Access’ (OA) movement and the increasing general prominence of social media. The OA movement, aiming to make immediate access to articles automatic and free of charge, started among natural scientists objecting to the inordinately high prices charged for journals by some publishing companies,

and its initial form did not fit the social-science situation well. Its idea has obvious attractions for readers, and of course we would all like to see knowledge diffused as widely as possible – especially knowledge of our own papers. Authors enthusiastic on that point are less enthusiastic about the accompanying requirement that they pay a sum to cover the costs of production of their papers.

Some major funding bodies have made it compulsory that articles on work funded by them should be free to readers. The policy is of special concern to ISA, as to other learned societies (especially ones with international journals), because free open availability of journals may lead libraries to cancel their subscriptions, which would have a disastrous effect on ISA’s total income. It is not clear how far ‘author pays’ sums will compensate for any subscription losses; we have the special dilemma that it is vital to our policy that articles by authors from the global South can be included in our journals, but that will only be viable if they are charged much less – and so the sums we receive give little support to our journal production or other activities. However, a lot depends on the pressures in the local situation at potential authors’ national bases. If the OA requirement applies only to work supported by a national funding body, for papers with other funding or none authors can then do what they wish – if they have the money available to allow real choice, that is.

There is an obvious risk that editors and publishers

will have reason to be tempted to favour papers which make a larger and more direct financial contribution, whether simply to cover costs or to make profits. Any way in which some authors get their papers published sooner than others, or even instead of others, for financial reasons would not just be unfair and inappropriate as between individuals, but liable to bias the directions of knowledge development in regrettable ways. It would be ironic if free access for readers made it less likely for authors, or meant that readers would be less likely to find articles close to their own interests. So far, ISA journals appear to receive very few papers whose work has been funded by bodies with coercive requirements, but these are early days, and more countries seem to be taking up OA pressures. I found myself attending a number of large public meetings about this in England; a close eye needs to be kept on developments by my successor.

Sage, like other publishers, has set up a journal (Sage Open), which ‘evaluates the scientific and research methods of each article for validity and accepts articles [which appear online] solely on the basis of the research’ – that is, it does not attend to the substantive content or interpretation in deciding whether to accept. It was suggested that we might be prepared to ‘cascade’ articles rejected by *Current Sociology* or *International Sociology* by passing them down to *Sage Open*; the Publications Committee decided against this. There is now a number of enterprises, probably very noticeable in your in-box as they are in mine, that have been set up to run ‘conferences’ with publisher Transactions, and supposedly peer-reviewed journals, which are intended to provide participants with c.v. items of a kind which will be picked up by search engines and satisfy the demands of audit culture, while not really applying the usual academic standards – and probably making money for those running them. It seems important to the maintenance of our credibility that our publications should be clearly dissociated from these.

Few journals these days are sold to individuals. Publishing companies commonly offer to universities not subscriptions to single journals, but large bundles. The prices may or may not be seen as satisfactory, but the result – free access for many university members

to a wide range of journals – is highly convenient, and must help to make sociology more genuinely international than it was before the days of the internet. However, it tends to be assumed that the availability of the internet now solves all problems of access, but this tacit assumption ignores the conditions under which some colleagues in the global South work. Not only may their departments be unable to afford to purchase publishers’ bundles of journals¹, or to provide each member of staff with a computer, but electricity supply may only be intermittent. I was uneasy about treating the access problem as solved by that, and attempted to start a programme to elicit some data about such matters as the availability of computers and electricity, and whether paper copies would actually be of more practical use. Unfortunately the local helpers lined up to use a first little questionnaire about this were advised not to do it, as this might appear to be tantamount to spying! It was evident that more local knowledge and preparatory work than we could provide would be needed to collect sufficient data as a basis for policy. Every book offering useful advice to potential authors says that it is crucial to choose an appropriate journal to aim at, and to be familiar with its style and requirements – but this is not always easy advice to take!

Sage, and I assume also other companies, has reason to take a strong interest in the success of the journals in its stable, and it provides a lot of numerical data on various indicators of success; not just citations, but even the numbers of people accessing particular articles online, and for how long. What even Google Analytics, which offers resources for such calculations, cannot do, however, is to offer data on the *reasons* for the numbers; sometimes it seems obvious, for instance, that an article topic was of timely special interest, or that it is one that students often have to write essays on – but that is plausible interpretation, not direct evidence. Did you realise that when you read enough of an article to decide that it was rubbish, or not really on what you were interested in, that would be mechanically recorded as a point in its favour?

Authors are strongly encouraged by publishers to adopt strategies, in such matters as the choice of keywords, which will maximise reading, citation and ‘

impact'. There is, of course, no necessary relation between these numerical indicators and the intellectual merits of the papers concerned (see Fleck 2013 on 'impact') – but is there any reason to think that the effort to maximise visibility undermines intellectual merit? Authors are also encouraged to use Facebook and Twitter to spread the news of their papers, undignified as this might seem to older colleagues. It is clear that simple repetition of a title will make it more salient, and thus increase the likelihood that someone will look at the paper.² Perhaps some such mechanism is an inevitable product of the need to be somehow selective when far too much material is easily available, since nobody could read all of it? When there were fewer sociologists and journals, arguably mechanisms such as scanning whole journals did more for the intellectual life than searching Google for key words does now.

Running the association

ISA periodicals are not a stationary set, and recent movements in social media and electronic communication have affected the suitability of their present organisation. One can see how an organisational structure is needed which can both take charge effectively of daily routine, and report to the Executive on broad policy issues and decisions – and technological and editorial changes may also require organisational changes elsewhere. Thus there is no precedent for deciding whether online appearance is 'publication', and therefore maybe automatically within the sphere of the Publications Committee, especially when the format has been initiated outside the committee. *Current Sociology* has a new review issue, whose content is entirely review articles, so far ones mainly drawn from Sociopedia. At present this is organised by the editor of Sociopedia, in cooperation with the editor of *Current Sociology*. The time is coming when the decision will need to be made whether or not to continue this format, which might suggest appointing another editor rather than continuing the relatively informal extra work load on two existing editors. The *ISA eSymposium*, while continuing in essentially the same form, has moved in with the *Social Justice and Democrati-*

sation (SJD) web site; it is understood that SJD is expected over time to broaden its remit so that the appearance there of the eSymposium will look less anomalous; there are however complications which follow from the fact that it has been a membership benefit, rather than giving free access to all comers.³ It has its own editor, while there is also a leader with responsibility for SJD, but the latter has no location in the committee structure; if it is not to become officially a publication, some alternative needs to be found. *Global Dialogue*, meanwhile, is undoubtedly a publication, but it was set up as a presidential initiative run by its editor Michael Burawoy, and has had no connection with the Publications Committee. His presidential term is now over, so it will no longer be possible to treat it as part of the President's remit; a decision is needed as to where it will be located if it continues.

ISA, by its nature as a truly international organisation, has some obvious permanent organisational problems. A truly international organisation is inevitably more expensive to run than a national one; travel expenses, and even postal costs, are greater; translation is sometimes necessary, and more of it would be appreciated, but it is expensive. Those who are active in ISA's central organisation commonly have wide international experience of some kind, but it remains true that nobody can be really well-informed about the characteristic work situations and local intellectual life of many of the other participants. We can easily not even know the dates of their academic years, the ways in which their disciplinary boundaries are set, or the legal situation of higher education and research in their countries, as well as not sharing first languages. Against that background, active cooperation at a considerable distance is required, without provision for even the officers to meet more than once a year.

Some additional money has been granted by Sage to allow us to pay for editors to attend important conferences they would not otherwise be attending, so that they can learn about new developments, make contacts, encourage good conference papers to be submitted to our journals, identify potential editorial board members, and so on. In addition, the

Publications Committee has now established the practice of 'Meet the Editors' sessions; that is a somewhat misleading title, because meeting potential authors or readers is by no means all that has been done. Efforts are regularly made to arrange for editors to be available at a Sage stall at conferences, or to organise a session where they talk about their journals. Some of this is in effect just advertising, but some is much more like professional development (which the EC now has the policy of representing at every ISA conference, forum etc.) – and indeed the two cannot always be clearly distinguished. Highly successful workshops have been offered in Latin America and elsewhere, on publishing journal articles, but we may be confident that this also draws useful attention to *Current Sociology* and *International Sociology*. A new step was the organisation of a workshop, when we were at the Ankara national associations meeting, on mentoring young colleagues. These ideas were developed further in Yokohama in eight short 'professional development' sessions on different aspects of publishing; this was the most elaborate opportunity yet, and we shall learn from the sessions' success and the feedback we got on them in ways which may influence future practice.

The ISA electoral system makes very little provision for continuity, although there is quite a lot by accident when the same colleagues serve a second term; it is not formally impossible, though admittedly very unlikely, that every member of the executive could simultaneously be serving their first term, so that nobody knew what to do. Publications, however, has the advantage that editorial terms are not fixed to the four-year time span of the executive, so the policy has been adopted that as far as possible there should never be more than one new editor or new VP taking up office in the same year; this makes informal provision for others with more experience to give new recruits advice and support. This plan is surprisingly hard to achieve in practice, as changing contingencies affect different editors in different ways, but it is worth the effort.

Relating to the constituency

There is an element of tension between the attempt to maximise the diversity and coverage of our journals, while also maintaining high international intellectual standards. As with other respected journals, ours have high rejection rates and, while we maintain the size of each issue [which reflects the amount of work its production creates], the more submissions we receive the more rejections there have to be. We certainly have not done anything to reduce submissions – quite the reverse. It is a strong general ISA policy to draw on and incorporate sociology worldwide. International standards have been widely diffused, and the expectation that academics should all be active researchers, and publish their work in articles rather than books, has been created. Many papers which could not be accepted are submitted. It is against this background that workshops on writing articles for international journals have been held. It is also understood that the editors will be prepared to work with individual authors of such papers, from areas with less international involvement, on revisions of promising but initially unsatisfactory articles to bring them up to the conventional standard. These efforts benefit both parties: authors are more likely to get their papers published, and editors are more likely to get an interesting range of good papers for their journals. But Gabriel Abend (2006) shows some of the significant ways in which Latin American journal articles differ from US ones, and such data inevitably raise questions about the justification of the criteria implied – but the recipients appear to appreciate the assistance, rather than objecting to what could be seen as intellectual imperialism. Perhaps it is relevant that ISA editors are at present as truly an international team as one could hope for, with representatives from five different continents.

This short paper has drawn attention to some of the factors involved in the practical processes of production of contemporary publications. All sociologists participate in the world system of publications, both as readers and as writers; as sociologists, we can also understand the social factors which influence the forms that it takes, and so perhaps share with ISA the

task of striving to maintain and improve the system, whether close to home or cross-nationally.

Notes

¹ Though this problem is in part solved, because Sage provides free access for many Third World departments, and other large journal publishers have similar policies.

² This is a clear example of Kahneman's (2011) distressing findings that in general repeated experience of anything leads to it feeling good and seeming true.

³ Membership benefits cost the Association money, but are presumed to lead to higher membership which will counterbalance that.

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Jennifer Platt served eight years as a member of ISA's Executive before becoming Vice-President for Publications. Her Research Committee and area of central interest is the history of sociology, including its research methods; she is the author of *A Brief History of the ISA: 1948-1997*.
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