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## Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies

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### Keyword: Journal

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# Keyword: *Journal*<sup>1</sup>

Jonathan Sterne

*Given the proliferation of open-access, non-profit publication outlets for cultural studies scholars, what are the possibilities for a journal like Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies, which remains tied to a print model and a for-profit publisher? This short essay considers publication of critical work as both an intellectual exercise and a strategic activity, and argues for the necessity of attending to both aspects of scholars' labor. Understanding publication as a professional strategy also implies particular ethical and political responsibilities for a critical journal that exists as an association journal, and it implies particular responsibilities for reviewers and editors.*

*Keywords: open access; digital humanities; cultural studies; publishing; politics of knowledge; sociology of scholarly production*

What should be the purpose and form of an association journal today? How about the contents of a journal—its subgenres like the article, the commentary, the review? Does it make a difference when that journal is for ostensibly *critical* work, whether in cultural studies or in one of the other self-proclaimed critical strains of communication studies?

Although it exists in a somewhat different media system, the publication process that this essay will go through is still built around the same assumptions that obtained when I started university in 1989. It privileges paper. The writing will be edited and laid out for a bound codex. A .pdf will be generated as an epiphenomenon of the paper production process. This process assumes that you will hold a bound issue of this journal in your hand to read this essay. But of course, if you're doing that, you're in the great minority. You are more likely reading it on a screen somewhere, having retrieved it from a digital library repository; or perhaps you printed it out yourself. In that case, the primary relationship between this essay and the other essays in this "issue" is not one of binding, but one of periodicity and metadata. It is tagged to show up with the other commentary pieces and it was published at the same time (in this case, in the precise sense of "made public"). And yet, the production process

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that conditions this issue will still act *as if* the affordances and constraints of print, and specifically the publishing protocols around print journals, are the main factors to take into account.

It would be easy to make an appeal to irony here. As in: “isn’t it *ironic* that a critical journal such as this one hasn’t kept up with the times?” Or, we could go the other way, and be proud of our conservatism, as if we had taken on board one or another critique of technological determinism and are living proof of the continued vitality of a cultural approach to communication. But both positions conceal a deeper lack of reflection. The former assumes that new communication technologies have an inherently progressive logic that we must “get with.” The latter imagines that there has been thoughtful dialogue about the form of scholarship, the needs of scholars and students, the system of publication and that reasonable people concluded that we should just keep doing what we’ve been doing. But NCA journals like this one continue on in their present form because of a lack of serious reflection. As a group, communication scholars have not been sufficiently critical of the form their scholarship takes (however one defines critical scholarship). Despite a wave of experimentation with the heyday of postmodernism, and despite our students’ great comfort with digital tools, experimentation with the form of scholarly publication is still considered “risky” or “supplemental” in a junior scholar’s dossier for hiring or promotion. Despite critiques like Ted Striphas’ “Acknowledged Goods,” and despite a large body of scholarship on intellectual property and political economy, we still produce voluminous work that serves for-profit publishers.<sup>2</sup> We agree to arbitrary limits on the ways our texts circulate. We sign our rights away in outrageous author agreements (including the Taylor and Francis agreement I will likely sign to get this essay into print). We accept shrinking word limits for our articles due to “space limitations” in journals whose primary referent may be print, but whose primary mode of circulation is digital. We accept old measures of significance and impact when judging scholarship, rather than trying to develop new ones.

For the communication studies scholar committed to open access, there is a growing and impressive list of potential outlets for publication. Within communication and media studies one has options like *International Journal of Communication*, *Canadian Journal of Communication*, *Fibreculture*, *First Monday*, and so on. Online periodicals that break the print journal mold, like *Flow*, *Sounding Out!*, *In Media Res*, and *Antenna* offer faster routes to publication and short, up-to-date topicality. In the broader field of cultural studies, projects like *Open Humanities Press*, and the Alliance for Networking Visual Cultures’ *Vectors* and *Scalar* projects offer many opportunities for publication and experimentation with form. Emerging fields of study are making their periodical publications “born digital” as evidenced by journals like *Media Industries* or *The Journal of Sonic Studies*, *SoundEffects*, and *Interference*. Older multimedia projects that attempted to expand critical scholarship beyond print, like the Media Education Foundation, are revealed to have been ahead of their time. As important and field-defining scholarship appears in these venues, they will come to take on prestige of their own, just as a generation of interdisciplinary journals like *Cultural Studies*, *Social Text*, *Public Culture*, *Cultural Critique* and many others

became important outlets, places people wanted to publish, because of the association with other groundbreaking work therein.

So what is to become of an association journal—a print journal—in this milieu? How should critical scholars imagine their own publication process?

1. We must acknowledge that publication is a strategic activity as well as one geared toward the free exchange of knowledge. It is strategic in that publications advance scholars' careers through the prestige an outlet accords. The choice of outlet is often about an author's hopes for reaching a particular audience. But scholars also publish because of more amorphous ideas about "getting our ideas out" and in those cases, we may be more interested in simply having our ideas available than the prestige or targeting of a particular outlet. This is especially the case with open access publishing. *The Journal of Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* exists in a particular relation to these multiple relations to publishing: it was founded to confer institutional prestige in a particular institutional context. The journal exists at all because a group of critical scholars within the National Communication Association felt the need for another association journal, one that would better serve their interests. To a certain extent, this is a local concern. It pertains to people who work in departments where the people in power use NCA journal affiliation in judgments about tenure, promotion or merit. Yet those are serious concerns, and until such time as the term "NCA department" is meaningless and movements like open access (or interdisciplinary journals) are freely embraced, the journal has an important role to play in supporting the work of graduate students and assistant professors.

This kind of institutional responsibility comes with some ethical imperatives. To effectively fulfill the role of protecting and promoting critical scholarship in NCA (and departments that prefer NCA journals), editors and reviewers need to be careful to avoid the kinds of theoretical and methodological orthodoxies that sometimes plague academic journals—whether "critical" or not. This means reviewers should not reject articles simply because they disagree (or worse, because their work is not cited). We must distinguish between critiques of argument, evidence, significance and reasoning, and *political* disagreement. The latter is not a sole criterion for article rejection. Rejection happens on political grounds more often than it should—liberals rejecting Marxists, Marxists rejecting anarchists, feminists rejecting feminists of a different stripe. Politicized work, at its best, will always engender sharp disagreements, and we ought to be encouraging that in the space of our journals. Real, substantive political debate is surprisingly rare in otherwise self-identified left scholarship. The same could be said about how we review authors in relation to existing disciplinary practices. We should judge methodological innovation in relation to the subject at hand rather than conformity to existing scholarly models or practices. We should judge articles in terms of their own theoretical or intellectual goals, and not our own. Finally, tenured reviewers should sign their reviews, so authors know where critiques are coming from (it will also keep us reviewers more honest). I sign all my reviews now.

2. This journal could be a place where some of the limits of "journalness" could be challenged within the NCA framework. It should experiment with format. Periodicity

does not require symmetry: every issue does not have to follow the same format (or even a small handful of formats). Given its prestige-conferral function, it would only make sense to abandon print publication if all NCA journals did. However, there is no reason why online versions of articles must be the same as print versions. Online versions could be longer (when warranted). They could employ more multimodal forms of scholarship, whether that means simply embedding audiovisual content, or more advanced forms of hyperlinked writing.

Most tantalizingly, *Journal of Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* articles could employ their positions behind an academic paywall to directly link to all other electronic sources they cite. Since most of the sources are *also* likely to be behind paywalls and require the user to be logged into a university network, the experience could be seamless. Direct access to sources, even when limited, is a powerful pedagogical tool. Last term, when teaching a chapter out of Lynn Spigel's *Make Room for TV*, I noted a tantalizing reference to a *Harper's* article on the suburbs from 1953.<sup>3</sup> A few clicks later I had the article in hand. By placing her reading of the piece against several passages she did not quote, I was able to vividly demonstrate the hermeneutics behind her historiographic practice. Now imagine if every article *invited* every reader to do that kind of work. It is implied by the endnote and bibliography, but we could use those tools to facilitate it. This is perhaps a two-decade old claim on the behalf of hypertext, but it remains largely unfulfilled, at least for mainstream scholarly journals. I am thinking less of radical avant-garde strategies than the mundane pointing-and-showing that happens on a daily basis as we play videos, show pictures, or refer to assigned readings in our classrooms.

3. Finally, the editorial board and readership should open the journal's books and examine them. The greatest obstacle to open access is cost. Print journals make use of expert labor in copyediting, layout, and other aspects of production and distribution. Most open access journals are currently supported by a combination of foundation and agencies' money and libraries. But they also heavily depend on the free labor of scholars who do production and editing work that used to be paid, not to mention server maintenance and technical support.

What are the paid labor costs involved in editing and layout for print? How much of the cost of production is tied to paper? How much revenue does the journal generate, and how much money would association dues alone bring to the journal? Such questions are muddled a bit by the Taylor & Francis association and resulting aggregation with other journals and publishing projects, but my colleagues in publishing tell me that they are knowable. If association dues could go most (or all) of the way to supporting the cost of publishing an open access academic journal, critical scholars could lead a movement for NCA to end its affiliation with Taylor & Francis, and to make all its journals open access. If it turns out that association income would not cover publication costs, then we need to consider other models. If the association derives most of its income from Taylor & Francis' sale of our journals, we will need to have a conversation about whether this is an ethical or sustainable model.

These proposals only scratch the surface of what is possible, even within the very real constraints of a paywall and association affiliation. Given our claimed

expertise, we owe it to ourselves, our students, and our colleagues to enhance and revise our own communication practices as scholars. Journal publication is only one possible node in that matrix of practices, but it is a crucial rite of passage that the field uses to reproduce itself. We can help the field better reproduce itself by caring for this journal's two separate, related functions—assigning credit and exchanging ideas—tending carefully to each, and tending carefully to the changing status of print among the practices of scholarly communication.

## Notes

- [1] Thanks to Carrie Rentschler and Dylan Mulvin.
- [2] Gary Hall, *Digitize This Book!: The Politics of New Media, or Why We Need Open Access Now* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Kathleen Fitzpatrick, *Planned Obsolescence: Publishing, Technology and the Future of the Academy* (New York: New York University Press, 2011); Ted Striphas, "Acknowledged Goods: Cultural Studies and the Politics of Academic Journal Publishing," *Journal of Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 7, no. 1 (2010): 3–25.
- [3] Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 200.