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Transformed Publication Strategies

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This article looks at publication strategies from two perspectives. First, the author describes her own publication strategy. She shows how it evolved over time and explains why she adopted a balanced strategy mixing books and papers, English and French, collective and individual authorship. She then builds on her experience as co-editor of two journals, one French and one international, analyses the consequences of the passage of the first to a big commercial publisher and compares the decision-making processes in the two cases. She finishes by pleading for decision-making procedures that allow more discussions and collegial work than the current systems of editors soliciting reviewers.

This article has an uncommon status. It is not based on any extensive research but on my personal experience as an author and as a member of editorial boards. It is therefore a subjective testimony and a personal reflection. It builds on two different sources. The first one is an online article (Musselin 2019) published in a symposium of *Sociologica*, directed by Elena Esposito and David Stark on 'What is your publication strategy?' (Stark 2019). Here, I will sum up the main ideas in that article and stress that the notion of 'publication strategy' came to me late and that I have adopted what I describe as a balanced strategy that voluntarily combines publications of books and papers, publications in French and in other languages (mostly English), private editors, and open science. The first part of the paper will thus draw on my experience as an author of publications.

My second source is my experience as editor-in-chief (from 1991 to 2005) of the French journal, *Sociologie du travail*, and as co-editor (from 2008 to 2013) of the international journal, *Higher Education*. My objective is not only to compare the two journals and the way we made decisions, but also to reflect on the transformation of the journal's production as the French journal left a French publisher (or rather was abandoned by it) and joined Elsevier in 1998 in order to be simultaneously printed and published online. The main argument of the second part will be that this move to Elsevier quite significantly affected the physical production process and the definition of the audience of the journal. At the same time, the peer-based decision-making process remained as before, based on regular meetings of the editorial board. I will stress the advantages of this model of reviewing papers and defend the idea that it could advantageously replace the more industrial and impersonal decision-making process practised by various international journals.

From No Publication Strategy to a Balanced One

The notion of a publication strategy was not on my radar as a PhD student in the 1980s and when I began my career in academia. Choosing which journal to publish in, going for international journals, adapting the content of the paper to the 'style' of the journal it will be submitted to, all these were not considerations taken into account before writing a piece. It does not mean that no norms existed: monographs were at least as important as articles, publishing in French journals was expected, and single-author publications were favoured in order to 'prove' one's intellectual autonomy. It was more about ticking the boxes than developing a strategy.

In fact, I first discovered that publishing could be strategic when, at the beginning of the 2000s, I collaborated with a colleague in management studies. As we were ready to publish our results, he said we should not go for a monograph (as I implicitly supposed we would) but that we should target high-impact-factor journals. He looked at a list of potential journals ranked by impact factors, all in English, and identified two or three that could be of interest, recognized by his own institution, a business school.

Indeed, this reflection on where, what, and with whom to publish, as well as how to write a paper according to the 'style' of a specific journal, has become more of an issue in the last two decades. What seemed awkward to me at that time has become rather usual today. Even if I am still not as far along as my management colleague in my own publication strategy, I pay more attention today to what and where to publish, and tend to avoid papers in non-peer-reviewed journals or chapters in edited books. Therefore, I now have a publication strategy, which I describe as a balanced one.

First, this strategy means that I publish not only papers but also books. Papers cannot replace books because only books can provide the space to coherently develop multiple angles and rather comprehensive stories linking different mechanisms together.[a] Reciprocally, papers are great to expose one's argument and mobilize the specific empirical data attached to it. Therefore, we need both. As I explained in the aforementioned article (Musselin 2019: 47):

> When I [. . .] wrote the French version of the book translated as *The Market for Academics* (Musselin 2009 [2005]), it was important for me to be able to put in the same piece the analysis of the different phases of academic hiring: decision to (re)open a position, definition of the position's profile, selection of the candidates and academic judgment, negotiation of the 'price' of the selected candidate. And then, to show how these phases are more or less

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articulated and to insert this specific moment of hiring within a wider understanding of academic labor markets in the three countries under study in the last chapter.

I then also published papers deriving from this book.

Second, I publish in English but also in French. Publishing in English started early, not as a strategy but because higher education does not exist as a field in France. Therefore, the only way to exchange ideas with colleagues in higher education studies was to attend international conferences and to publish in English. This was also the only way to find readers beyond the francophone community. If publishing in English was not required when I started my career, it has become more and more assumed from universities and national research organizations nowadays. However, too often English is a synonym for international publications, while French publications in contrast are considered parochial.[b] There is thus an assumption that all journals published in English immediately reach an international and large audience, while articles in French are low-level, with a restricted audience. This is, of course, wrong.

Furthermore, one should be aware that the way of writing – the way of mobilizing the literature, developing an argument, using data, finding an outline that deviates from the standard 'state of the art, method, results, discussion,' etc.) – is different in French and in English. For me, writing papers in French is important to keep this French tradition of writing sociology, but also to maintain the discussion with the French-speaking community. Therefore, I favour publishing in French journals that are well-reputed peer-reviewed journals in order to reach a rather large audience. As for my books, I always wrote them in French. Although I can directly write papers in English, I must recognize that I have never been able to conceive a whole book in a language other than French. I was lucky that some of them have then been translated to, and published in, English first, and more recently Turkish and Spanish.

A third dimension of this balanced publication strategy deals with individual or collective publications. I again use both but have clearly increased my participation in co-authored publications, owing to the development of collective research projects and the fact that it has become much more accepted than at the start of my career: at that time, co-authorship was often understood as evidence of a lack of independence, especially when a senior and a junior were publishing together. Today, papers with more than two authors have become more frequent. Nevertheless, although I have very much appreciated my collaborative writing with wonderful colleagues in the last years, I still prefer solitary exploration and personal reflections. I also advise younger colleagues to write some single-authored publications, because evaluation remains individual, and single-authored publications remain the only way to appreciate a scholar's contributions.

Finally, and more recently, publication strategies must aspire to promote open science. In France, higher-education institutions, national research organizations (such as the CNRS), the French national research council, and the Conference of

University Presidents, are all pushing in this direction. They ask authors to publish with a CC BY license and to have a strategy of rights retention. Diamond Scientific Publishing is also encouraged. This is fine because it is important to make science as accessible as possible. However, again I think that, on this matter, balanced choices should be made.

In fact, so far, not all the measures that have been taken have stopped the development of big publishers, which are becoming more concentrated and always earn more money and sign national agreements with countries or large academic institutions. They also develop new services (data management, data archiving, etc.) in order to complement classical editorial activities. It is therefore not certain that the solutions advanced by cOAlition S (a consortium of research organizations and funders backing Plan S, an initiative for open-access science publishing) are always suitable and efficient. Let me take three examples of questionable implementation. First, the Diamond option. It requires public higher institutions to take over the editorial tasks performed by private publishers: this is costly, requires human resources, and, for the moment in France, no supplementary resources have been allocated for such purposes.

The strategy of rights retention also raises some problematic issues. It means that authors forgo any possibility of blocking the use of their work. The control exercised by private publishers on scientific production no longer exists. Thus, AI, such as ChatGPT, can freely use it. This seems rather paradoxical at a time when journalists, media, and websites accuse ChatGPT of using their work without paying for intellectual rights. Should we allow ChatGPT to freely use all scientific production?

Finally, this also raises questions about the future of books. Can we really do without publishers for books? I always received very valuable support for the editing and the distribution of the books from the private French publishers I have been working with. I do not see how their contribution can be replaced if we want books to remain a vector for science communication.

In sum, my situation as author has changed considerably since I started my career. Publishing papers, in English, and with colleagues has become more and more frequent. However, I think that writing books, publishing in one's native language, or being a single author should not be abandoned. I am afraid that this balanced publication strategy is under threat.

In the Name of the Editors

Let us now turn to the point of view of the editor in charge of selecting papers for academic journals. Here, I will provide two rather disparate experiences. The first is with a French journal, *Sociologie du travail*. In that journal, I started as a member of the editorial board before becoming editor-in-chief for about ten years. When I started, the journal was only printed but has more recently been published online as well. The latter transformation reveals the in-depth transformation of the publishing industry more broadly and the increasing control of publishers in the production of journals. However, this did not affect the way decisions were made in this journal, a decision process that differed considerably from the one I experienced later, particularly as co-editor of *Higher Education*.

The Reorganization of the Publishing Industry with Online Publication

Sociologie du travail, which was my first editorial experience, was created in 1958 by Michel Crozier, Jean-Daniel Reynaud, Alain Touraine, and Jean-René Tréanton (Borzeix and Rot 2010). It is run by a professional association, to which the title belongs, and publishes four issues each year. When I entered the editorial board, it was published by Dunod, a French publisher. However, in 1997, shortly after I became editor-in-chief, Dunod changed its strategy and informed us that they would stop publishing the journal. The editorial board decided to look for a new publisher. It also decided that this would be an opportunity to change the distribution of the journal and to have both printed and online versions. With three members of the editorial board, we contacted a number of French publishers. Some were interested in publishing the journal, but they told us that online publications were not on their agenda. We therefore also contacted international publishers. Finally, only Elsevier was both interested in a social sciences journal published in French and willing to publish it online. The contract signed with Elsevier France guaranteed sufficient revenues to the association. It also assured that the individual and institutional subscription prices would remain about the same as before and comparable with other French journals (far less expensive than the international standard). As I will develop later, the way we made decisions about the papers in this journal remained unchanged. Editorial decisions were never an issue during the yearly meetings we had with our Elsevier liaison. A likely explanation is that our authors were French and that the software managing the review process was only in English.

It is clear that online publication, especially as we were a prime mover in the French context, had positive consequences for the visibility of the journal within the francophone audience. We thought that it could also work on the English scene and decided to publish each year, online only, translations of a selection of three or four papers. However, they hardly found a readership, probably for the reasons mentioned above: writing in French is different from writing in English, and an English translation of a paper written in a French way does not produce an English paper.

Beyond online publication, the transition to Elsevier also brought some important changes that affected the technical production process, which was a continual issue with the publisher. First, as mentioned, the price of subscriptions remained about the same, but the quality of the final product declined. Each issue became much thinner because the paper thickness was considerably reduced, the font became smaller, and the overall presentation denser. Second, after many years of resistance, we had to accept that the editorial assistant of the journal only got the opportunity for one proofreading instead of two.[c] The latter had been important in order to guarantee a high quality of the content in terms of syntax, grammar and orthography. After the suppression of the second proofreading, the editorial assistant was desperate each time she discovered missed first-proofreading corrections and found that new errors had been introduced. She, and the editorial board, felt that the objective of a high level of quality for the French language was not fulfilled.

We furthermore experienced the development of a new organization of the publishing industry. With Dunod, we were used to an integrated firm, managing the whole process from the subscriptions to the final printed version. With Elsevier and the transition to online diffusion, we faced the disconnection of the different activities being led by different independent entities. With our contact person at the journal, we discussed our results and our activities: the number of published papers, the number of papers downloaded per month, the number of subscriptions, the rate of rejection, and the level of sales revenue. However, she had no control over the branch that wound up in charge of printing and – more problematically – on the sales department, which joined ScienceDirect. The latter determined the sales policy and sold *Sociologie du travail* to university libraries bunched together with other journals. Because the university libraries 'bought' bunches, and no single titles, it became very difficult to know what our real audience was or to get a sense of the sales revenue. With Dunod, we had to trust them about the number of subscriptions and the level of the sales revenue – strictly linked to the number of subscriptions – that they shared with us. However, we had no idea of Dunod's net income, i.e., how much they earned from the journal. With Elsevier, it became even more obscure: we had no idea of the revenue linked to the number of downloads. As they became steadily higher and as subscriptions dramatically declined, we were increasingly dependent on the sales strategy of ScienceDirect, and the variation in the sales revenue became more and more abstract. We therefore clearly observed how ScienceDirect became the main actor, with the progressive reduction of printed issues and the dependence of our contact person on the marketing strategies. Following the recent doctoral dissertation of Marianne Noël (2023) on scientific publications in chemistry, more work should be done on the redistribution of power relationships within the research-publishing industry.

Peer-review: Yes, but Why not a More Collegial One?

The transition to online distribution was a turning point in the production of *Sociologie du travail*. It finally led the editorial board to decide in 2017 to leave Elsevier, opt for online only via OpenEdition, and become a Diamond publication (Demazière 2017).

Despite these important changes, the scientific decision-making process evolved only marginally. The editor-in-chief and the editorial assistant still allocate each paper they receive to three members of the editorial board. If none of the latter are specialists in the field covered by the paper, an external scholar is asked to produce a review, although this is rarely the case. Then the committee meets (until the Covid pandemic this entailed in-person meetings). During these meetings, all papers are

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successively discussed. For each of them, the three reviewers present the paper they had been asked to review, relate what they find interesting or problematic, and propose whether the paper should be accepted or revised (and how), and lead the discussion until the whole editorial board comes to a common conclusion. One of the three reviewers is in charge of writing a letter to the author with the decision and the pros and cons, along with suggestions for revisions. The letter is finally sent for approval to the two other reviewers, to the editor-in-chief and finally to the author. The same process is repeated for all the papers with a different trio for each.

Higher Education follows a very different process, one I already knew because I am regularly asked by international journals to write reviews. In this case, the whole procedure is digitalized by means of a common software package. There is no editorial assistant: everything is run by email and uploading. The only staff that the co-editors are in touch with is the person in charge of the journal at the publishing house. We sometimes had in-person meetings with the contact person regarding the presentation of data about the situation of the journal: the number of papers received, accepted, rejected, revised, and resubmitted, as well as the average time for review, readership, etc. Authors were only in email contact with the co-editor organizing the review of their paper and, if their paper was accepted, with the person preparing the manuscript, somewhere on the planet.

This is a well-known process for all those who have been editors, reviewers, or authors of journals published by the main publishers. It is very convenient, easy to work with, and probably cost efficient. Nevertheless, it raises many caveats. The most crucial one is the overly central role given individually to each co-editor.

The first reservation is that a co-editor is responsible for choosing the reviewers. Such a decision is never completely neutral, and it is therefore a rather important decision. This responsibility also rapidly becomes a burden, because finding reviewers has become a challenge (see for instance Zaharie and Osoian 2016; Zaharie and Seber 2018; Kaltenbrunner *et al.* 2022). In a panel I recently attended, the editor-in-chief of a highly selective journal said that she had to contact 12 reviewers to get a paper reviewed. If one considers that most reviewers are more likely to accept reviews for well-known journals, one can imagine how many email messages the editor of less-reputed journals must send to find reviewers. Finding reviewers who accept the task of writing a review and doing so in a qualified manner and ahead of a reasonable deadline is a problem, which I experienced as co-editor of *Higher Education*. I remember spending hours on Sundays, reading the new incoming papers of the week, thinking of names of reviewers for them, finding new names for papers whose reviewers did not accept the assignment, sending the new version of papers to the reviewers who read the first one with the hope they would be willing to review the next one, and so on. I recognize that my behaviour changed rapidly. In the beginning, I gave papers a chance that I found potentially interesting although not completely convincing. After some time, I decided to desk reject these papers, since I thought they would be rejected at the end of the process. I felt ashamed for doing this for at least three reasons. First, because I think that getting reviews, even with a ‘reject’ decision, is important for authors wishing to improve their writing and that it provides a better return than the rapid paragraphs co-editors write to justify a desk rejection. Second, having experienced desk rejections myself, I knew how much more difficult it is to accept such a rejection than a rejection based on reviews. One feels overlooked, not seriously read. Finally, it gives excessive power to the co-editor. I led this co-editor mission with a lot of commitment and tried to be as fair as possible, but who am I to be sure that I did not make any mistakes, that I did not reject a paper another co-editor would have saved? This gives, from my point of view, too much power to one single person.

The process again gives too much power to the co-editor when the reviews are received. If they converge, it is rather easy. However, when they differ – and this is rather frequent – either about the final decision or about the revisions required from the author, the co-editor is the sole person who decides which of the reviewers he or she will follow, which arguments he or she will especially stress.

In order to overcome the defection of reviewers as well as the power and the two heavy responsibilities placed in the laps of co-editors, I suggest that we should revert to a more collective decision-making process, leaving more room for *discussion* and consensus building. One of the problems encountered by the process followed by *Sociologie du travail* was the necessity to meet in-person. It was at the same time a very pleasant moment, very intense, with a lot of concentration but also a lot of laughs and pure collegiality. We probably made some mistakes nevertheless, but at least they were collegial and collectively assumed.

Now that we are all used to meeting online, why not come back to a more collective form of work among members of the editorial board? The editor-in-chief and co-editors – probably a larger number than today – could share the reading of the papers received, discuss their reviews, come to a collective decision, and prepare a common draft. This would of course mean a lot of work for the members of the editorial board, but I am sure people would accept to do this for a limited period, and the rotation of one third of the co-editors every year should be the rule. For the members of these editorial boards, the work will be much more interesting than spending hours finding reviewers. Furthermore, the overview such positions provide of the field and the possibility they give to influence the development of the field should serve as excellent motivation to accept the task of being a co-editor for three years.

Conclusion

It has been more than 40 years since I started my PhD. The expansion in the number of journals, the stratification among them, the transformation of the publishing industry, and the emergence of major players within it have radically changed the relationships of authors to publications. However, the academic profession has also changed. Preparing a dissertation and entering an academic career have become much more ‘organized’ than in the past. PhD candidates are now trained in writing papers, advice is given about the journals to aspire to, future candidates take part in

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mock auditions in order to be prepared when they are invited, etc. The requirements for a chance to enter academia are also more clearly specified: international publications are expected, as well as papers in peer-reviewed journals, some teaching experience, etc. Thus, having a publication strategy has become increasingly important. Nevertheless, I think that this should not be at the expense of quality and creativity. Both are at risk today, especially in the humanities and social sciences, where books and publications for a native audience should be preserved.

The pressure to publish has led to the development of numerous journals and the standardization of a review process, organized around co-editors soliciting reviewers and making decisions based on their reviews. However, this is reaching a limit. It requires too many reviews, and co-editors spend more and more time finding reviewers. Thus, desk rejections tend to increase, and peer-review is becoming less and less collegial. Instead of trying to develop incentives for reviewers, we should probably rethink the review process and leave more room for exchange and co-decisions among members of editorial boards.[d] In other words, we should not only focus on the transformation of the publishing industry but also improve what is in our hands: collegial academic decision making.

Notes

a. For that reason, I highly prefer PhD monographs to paper-based dissertations. A transversal introduction cannot replace the articulated development of an argument along chapters.

b. Just to give an example of that: The *American Journal of Socio*logy is considered by many French higher-education institutions as a top international journal. Having collected data on the institutional affiliation of all the authors published in this journal between 2001 and 2010, 82% of the papers were authored by academics of American institutions, 92% with at least one author in a US institution. These figures amounted to almost 90% and 95% for the *American Journal of Political Science* (Musselin 2019).

c. The editorial assistant is a CNRS staff member, whose role is to run the administrative tasks for the journal (receiving the papers, sending them to the reviewers, collecting the letters of revision, etc.), to organize the in-person meetings every six weeks, take notes of the decisions made, interact with the authors, read the proofs and make sure that the authors also read them, prepare the manuscripts for edition, and run the online process. In a nutshell, she performs the work that is distributed among different people or processes in international journals.

d. See for instance the token system proposed by Amy J. Ko at https://medium.com/bits-and-behavior/sustainable-peer-review-via-incentive-aligned-markets-a64ff726da56.

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