

## On Writing in Communication and Media Studies

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Writing is to academics both means and end, a practice that is indispensable for successful and fulfilling professional lives. It is a means to express our contributions to scholarly dialogue, and it is the end product we use to trade in the process of career development. Writing is also a great unifier: there are many subfields of knowledge within communication and media studies—and within the academy writ large—and an equally great variety of traditions of inquiry within each subfield, but writing is central to scholarly life in all of them.

In light of this, it is surprising how little time is formally devoted to the craft of writing during graduate education and junior faculty mentorship. It is one of those practices whose acquisition and mastery is informally addressed in the course of a learning-by-doing process, on occasion guided by the apprenticeship model among those who work in a lab setting. When conversations about it take place, it is often in the margins of discussions about the content of a particular text: How would it be best to frame the argument vis-à-vis this or that literature? Should this finding be presented in this or that way? Might I aim this manuscript to this or that journal?

This informal and somewhat peripheral nature of scholarly conversations about writing was never ideal, but they may have sufficed when publication dynamics in many domains of inquiry within the social sciences and humanities were simpler and more stable. When we started our doctoral training in science and technology studies in the 1990s and political science in the 1980s, respectively, our mentors delivered a clear message: one article published during graduate school, one or two conference papers, and a few well-developed chapters from the dissertation before going on the job market. When each of us began our first tenure-track jobs, senior colleagues shared equally straightforward guidelines for promotion: an average of one article per year, a strong book from the dissertation project published by a major university press at least a year before tenure review, and progress toward a second major project.

But there is a growing sense that the ground has shifted in the field of communication and media studies, and that the regime of relatively clear and manageable assumptions is being replaced by a more complex suite of expectations. A growth in the spectrum of the venues available for communication of scholarly knowledge, and a parallel increase in the volume of output, have been destabilizing the rules of

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the writing game. It is not uncommon for graduate students from top programs to enter the job market with either several journal articles or a book contract, or both. Indeed, in many instances the record of those hired for assistant professorships in leading departments would have constituted *prima facie* cases for tenure review not so long ago.

In turn, in some cases this has been leading to an implicit recalibration of expectations for promotion to tenured associate professor, as many who have served as external reviewers can attest. We have both evaluated the files of assistant professors whose publication records during their probationary periods would once have been appropriate for promotion to full professor. Systematic research on cognate fields of knowledge supports our personal experiences. For example, in the top-ranked sociology departments in the United States, the number of peer-reviewed journal articles published by newly hired assistant professors has doubled since the early 1990s, as has the number of articles published by those promoted to associate professor without having published a book. In addition, those who had a book that came out during their tenure-track period also had as many journal articles as did nonbook scholars in the 1990s (Warren, 2019). Of course, the reasons for this increase are complicated, and decisions regarding tenure and promotion remain centrally tied to assessments of quality and impact. However, the subjective nature of these arguably more important indicators creates a sense of uncertainty that can lead to the prioritization of more quantifiable measures such as the volume of output, at least in the minds of graduate students and early career faculty.

Further complicating the issue of productivity is the proliferation in the types of writing we undertake. Scholars increasingly write white papers, media articles, blog entries, and social media posts. There is the expectation, however, that these additional modes of writing, along with other types of text such as conference papers, book chapters, and edited volumes, should be pursued in addition to, rather than as a substitute for, the more valued forms of peer-reviewed journal articles and, often to a lesser extent, book monographs published by university presses. The resulting increase in the volume of output and proliferation of kinds of texts has led to two distinct yet interrelated consequences.

On the one hand, there has been a growth in the number of scholars who are keen on contributing to public discourse on crucial issues of the day. What we actually know—or think we know—goes beyond the things we publish in academic journals, with their strict, even rigid rules regarding format, content, evidence, conclusions, speculations, and so on. The processes for journal-article and book-monograph publication take so long that it becomes hard to engage in topics of the day, other than the occasional news interview or editorial. The peer-review process, while exceedingly valuable in many ways, can introduce a conservatizing effect that makes the expression of new ideas and approaches particularly difficult. A highly visible and timely technical report, media article, blog, or even stream of tweets that go viral can have great impact not only within the academy but also outside of it.

On the other hand, there is a mix of uncertainty and exhaustion—the latter partly an effect of the former, since overproduction is a typical strategy to counter decreased certainty. Writing influential white papers, media articles, and social media entries takes time, and there is only so much of it in the course of a workday. In addition, there is a sense among many scholars that writing for peer-reviewed outlets has become more formulaic and mechanized than what it used to be, which might be in part a genre-normalization effect

of the rise in the volume of production. Taking time to focus on big ideas before writing the next piece, and reading outside of the literature needed for that next piece, has become a luxury to many.

In this essay, we want to address the consequences of these trends for scholarly practice by reflecting on what we have learned about different kinds of writing, what makes their distinctive strengths unique, and how to evaluate their relative intellectual contributions. We conclude by offering a modest proposal for redirecting the craft of writing in a way that achieves impact both within the field and in society at large, and that is also an experience marked by higher levels of innovation and enjoyment.

### **Evolving Modes of Writing**

Academics trade in multiple writing currencies. But, as with foreign transactions, not all currencies are equally worthy. The refereed journal article occupies the place of the strong currency in the modern university, a sort of *primus inter pares* of types of texts. Even for fields that have so-called dual publishing tracks—whereby some members exclusively publish articles and others primarily books—a handful of high-impact articles is often considered superior to a high-impact book. This is in part because it is the only type of writing that all social science scholars undertake, and therefore it is more easily understood across subfields within a given discipline as well as across disciplines. It also provides a common standard for evaluation committees that have interdisciplinary membership.

Length limitations are paramount in articles, and over time, journals in many fields seem to have lowered word limits—though supplementary files that are published online provide a venue to expand the content. This invites the author to manage scarcity by crafting a lean text that builds a theoretical argument in as straightforward a way as possible, and tests it through the deployment of sufficient findings. This management of scarcity is present across all kinds of texts—books are finite, too—but it is particularly salient in journal articles. This leads the author to clarify for herself the conceptual argument very early on in the writing process in ways that might emerge later on for books and chapters. Furthermore, for authors who write articles during the beginning phases of a book project, this can serve the purpose of helping them to clarify the main pillars of the book's intended conceptual argument, and to probe it during the journal peer-review process. Finally, the double-blind nature of this process means that neither the journal editor nor the reviewers are necessarily on board with the idea beforehand—which happens more rarely in the single-blind review process for books—so the reviews can appear to the author not only more exacting but also more foreign. This, in turn, can lead to a certain feeling of alienation among the authors who might find themselves trying to satisfy demands from the editor and reviewers that they might not necessarily agree with in order to get the article published.

Using a fine arts analogy, if an article is akin to a canvas, a book is more like a mural. This analogy works in at least two ways. First, a book is not the sum of articles-turned-into-chapters in the same way that a mural is not the patching of different canvases. On the contrary, like a mural, a book takes the reader on a conceptual journey through a story that pieces together an array of empirical elements in a particular narrative progression. Second, the sheer size of the creative enterprise and the complex interdependencies among the different pieces often trigger an experience of enormity for the book author, as it does for the muralist, which is both exhilarating and exhausting, inviting rhetorical experimentation but also being

mentally demanding. A typical way of dealing with this is through writing that unfolds over several iterations usually spread across multiple years. Because of the scale and temporal length of the enterprise, it is not only the case that the editors and reviewers know the identity of the author in the typical single-blind review process, but that they have often familiarized themselves with the argument through presentations at conferences and seminars even before there is a formal manuscript submission. Thus, the review process frequently probes the text from within its argumentative confines, as opposed to what sometimes happens with journal articles.

The length of a typical book monograph affords a certain amount of what might be perceived as nonessential writing, but which is actually a source of strength since it embeds a higher degree of polysemy than short-form texts such as articles. This, in turn, invites a degree of narrative playfulness that is often appreciated by authors and readers alike. Furthermore, to keep readers' attention over relatively long periods, the weight of the theoretical argument is often carried by the empirical material rather than by the conceptual apparatus. That is, if in the journal article the findings are used to test a certain theoretical proposition and therefore from a narrative standpoint are somewhat secondary, in the book the findings are the central vehicle through which the theoretical argument comes alive. This centrality of the empirical material, and the often more creative storytelling resources deployed in books than in articles, help the content of the former sometimes travel better across multiple communities of discourse than the latter, and also across nonacademic publics.

Multiple authorship, more common in articles but also found in books, is yet another form of writing, one that is increasingly common as the range of theoretical, methodological, and substantive expertise needed to address contemporary issues has increased. Such writing often takes the form of dividing labor by assigning different sections, chapters, or roles to various coauthors based on their expertise. While this form of specialization is often necessary and valuable, the challenge becomes making the text speak in a single voice that is different, and better, than what it would have been were there not multiple authors. At its best, it is an iterative and collaborative process in which all the coauthors have left a mark on the entire text. Successful coauthorship is not easy, but done well it can be among the most satisfying forms of writing, combining as it does the somewhat isolated process of writing with the more interactive processes of conversation, deliberation, and debate. It can also serve as an important form of mentorship for graduate students and junior colleagues.

An edited volume, often seen as a lesser contribution than book monographs, is yet a different form of scholarly collaboration and writing. Surely there is a managerial, even logistical dimension involved in putting together a volume. But this should not be mistaken for what the core task is: An edited volume is the result of mobilizing a collectivity of voices that can convey ideas and arguments in ways that no single voice can. This is why, despite how difficult it has become to get a volume accepted by a leading university press, edited volumes can have a different field-making potential than that of a book or an article. The editor plays a key authorship role in this. If the writer of a book sometimes uses the empirical story to convey the conceptual argument, the editor of a volume often has an authorial voice that is expressed not directly but through the texts written by the chapter contributors.

Editing-as-writing is comprised of three main practices. First is the identification of a topic ripe for an intellectual exploration of a kind that cannot be equally accomplished through either an article or a book. Second is the selection of a group of contributors and the curation of their ideas—contributors usually have several ideas about what they can write about, and early conversations in the project are critical curatorial moments for the editor. Third is the working on the texts-in-progress through both direct feedback, selection of reviewers, and mediation of their comments and suggestions. Here the editor helps shape the text in decisive ways, even though it will not be under her name. This is a crucial difference between this and any other form of scholarly writing: the editor is somewhat selfless in that she devotes considerable amounts of time to making better a piece that will not carry her name. In a professional world that is largely based on individual reputation, a good editor is a *rara avis* who thrives on the virtue of self-effacement rather than resents it. She understands that this is at the basis of exerting intellectual influence by effectively mobilizing a community of voices around a particular issue.

Edited volumes are made of book chapters. In many cases they are solicited contributions, which means that the editor—and eventually the reviewers—are on board with the premise of the author's proposed contributions. This creates a more hospitable context for the author to test a new argument, but also sometimes leads to a less challenging review process. Because the editor tends to work closely with the author, shepherding the text through the process that leads from conception to final manuscript, this can constitute a good opportunity for the author to work on ideas-in-progress. Although the review process can sometimes be less rigorous, writing this kind of text can serve an important role in the development of a conceptual argument, putting out an initial version of a work-in-progress and building a community of inquiry with the editor and fellow authors working on similar or related issues.

The conference paper is an often undervalued yet quite salient form of scholarly writing. At its best, it provides the opportunity to present ideas and evidence at an early enough stage of development to garner useful feedback. It allows scholars to present their arguments and findings in a somewhat timelier and less formal fashion than that afforded by the journal- and book-publication processes. Equally important, it creates a venue for discussing potentially valuable nonfindings and even failures, and also mileposts for authors to use in marking progress on a research project. However, several factors work against realizing the full potential of conference papers, and of conferences more generally. The funding mechanism used by many universities for travel to conferences requires that the faculty member, postdoctoral associate, or graduate student have a paper accepted for presentation. This often leads to an overcrowded field of panels and panelists, thus resulting in little time for serious discussion and feedback. Many professional conferences require that a full paper be submitted for consideration as much as six months in advance, reducing the experimental quality of the writing and the value of feedback. Finally, even when conference papers are fully developed in form and substance, their value and legitimacy as an academic contribution tend to be heavily discounted until or if they are published as an article, often a year or more later.

Writing for media outlets, in particular those online, has become more common among academics in recent years. Media writing, either drawing directly from one's work or offering an analysis of an event or process informed by one's area of expertise, invites the author to craft a text that is more direct and engaging than the typical scholarly article. When done repeatedly, this can become a learning exercise that might end up contributing to making articles and books more accessible without sacrificing complexity.

Furthermore, this kind of writing provides an opportunity to get a quick and different type of feedback on ideas-in-progress. It also helps to build a public, professional persona that can result in new academic opportunities. Finally, it has the overall benefit of bridging the gap that still exists between the academy and the worlds of policy and the public at large.

The rising popularity of blogs first and more recently social media during the past decade and a half has been tied to a growing tendency among scholars to share ideas on them. While at first these might have seemed mostly marketing venues, over time they have in some cases morphed into symbolic spaces where scholars communicate ideas-in-progress and try to build a community of discourse around them. Unlike other genres of writing, no single social media post might amount to a significant contribution per se. But a series of posts, and the conversations that take place around them, can have noticeable effects not only within the scholarly community but also among the broader public. When it works well, this kind of writing is both assertive and open ended, making a point in a clear and straightforward manner yet also inviting response and fostering a subsequent exchange of ideas. The text is not assumed to be finished but is inherently a work-in-progress—which also differentiates it from any other form of writing that academics normally pursue.

### **Pluralizing the Craft**

The types of writing such as those discussed here require different skills, take alternative forms, serve divergent purposes, are developed on various timelines, are intended for multiple audiences, and provide different kinds of satisfaction for both authors and readers. We believe that all of them are legitimate venues for meeting our goals and responsibilities as scholars of producing and disseminating knowledge that is both influential within the academy and contributes to public discourse in society. The strength of a writing portfolio is because of, not despite, its diversity, enabling a scholar to engage multiple constituencies at various points in the evolution of a research program. This does not mean that every scholar should engage in all these modes of writing. The mix of a writing portfolio crafted by a scholar at any particular moment in her career has both personal and institutional components.

Regarding the former, writing is a very personal practice, to the point that even though an author is routinely told to think about the different intended publics for her texts, she is as often writing for herself as she is for others. In a nutshell, writing is an expression of the self. Navigating and being mindful of the tension between writing the text one would ideally like to read and the text others might want to read—a tension that is fairly common—is an essential aspect of a successful and fulfilling writing career. This is also why enjoyment is as important as effectiveness when it comes to writing; why the perception of mechanization that has been tied to the increase in productivity expectations is a particularly worrisome trend; and why the role of traditional media and social media writing—with their more immediate feedback and community dimensions—will likely gain centrality, and should therefore be somehow taken into account during hiring and promotion discussions. Overall, the key is adapting how we write to the intended audiences while always remaining both true to our individual identities and aware that our goal is to contribute meaningfully as scholars to conversations across publics.

Concerning institutional matters, and building on the personal ones, we believe that it is worth engaging in a collective conversation about the current criteria for assessing the quality and impact of a scholarly record, either for hiring or for promotion. The currently dominant criteria in place at leading departments are historical artifacts that emerged and consolidated at a particular juncture in the evolution of scholarly writing when practices and expectations regarding both volume and format were more stable than what they seem today. Organizational solutions that work well during periods of stability can lose some of their *raison d'être* during periods of transformations in the context for which they were optimized. Thus, we think the time is ripe for a conversation that maintains quality and impact as the foremost goals of scholarly writing, but also acknowledges the pluralization of writing practices enacted to achieve them. We recognize that there are no easy answers to a process that is necessarily complex and evolving. But a starting point is to acknowledge that under certain circumstances productivity might become a double-edged sword that, while important, can work against quality, impact, and job satisfaction; that quality partly resides in the work and its purpose and is not limited to a particular type of text; and that impact is centered on the scholarly community but can also go beyond it. In other words, the pluralization of writing practices calls for revisiting the criteria enacted to assess them. Adapting such a pluralist approach, both as individual scholars and scholarly communities, would, we believe, enhance the quality and impact of our work, and also make our experience as scholars more rewarding, creative, and enjoyable.

#### **Reference**

Warren, R. (2019). How much do you have to publish to get a job in a top sociology department. Or to get tenure? Trends over a generation. *Sociological Science*, 6, 172–196.