# A "Modest Proposal" on Writing That Is Not Modest Enough

## *Commentary*

NOSHIR CONTRACTOR
Northwestern University, USA

Following a remarkably astute exegesis on the evolving modes of writing in communication and media studies, Pablo J. Boczkowski and Michael X. Delli Carpini "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." I surmise their choice of the phrase "a modest proposal" was inspired by the satirical essay published anonymously in 1729 by Jonathan Swift under the title *A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People From Being a Burthen to Their Parents or Country, and for Making Them Beneficial to the Publick*. Swift begins by offering a heartbreaking narrative of the economic blight that afflicted contemporary Ireland and resulted in overpopulation, starving beggars and undernourished children. In a surprising, and deeply satirical, switch, he concludes his essay with a "modest proposal" that the way to end this misery would be for the poor to sell their offspring as food to the wealthy.

Boczkowski and Delli Carpini's use of Swift's essay title suggest that they are offering a call for dialog about changes that some within the communication and media studies scholarly community might find outrageous (albeit decidedly not quite as dark). From my vantage point, their proposal, while being a brilliant first step, is not "modest" enough. It needs to be far more disruptive if we want to stay relevant to scholarship and society as we enter the third decade of the 21st century. They accurately observe that the ecosystem hosting the evolving modes and venues for writing is in the throes of a massive transformation. And communication and media studies, as they gently suggest, have not (yet) been at the vanguard of acknowledging—let alone leveraging—the "pluralization of writing practices" to rethink quality and impact of our scholarship.

Their essay suggests four broad functions served by writing. First, it provides an opportunity for (co-)authors to get input from their academic peers during the stage in which they formulate and develop ideas. Second, it serves as an opportunity to share, with their peers, insights in response to specific research questions. Third, they offer the scholarly community the opportunity for a more synthetic and/or holistic understanding of current or emerging social phenomena. Fourth, they offer an opportunity to help repackage and share with the broader public insights in response to specific research questions or more synthetic/holistic perspectives.

They offer a very helpful scaffolding of the pros and cons of current and evolving modes of writing to accomplish these four functions. And while their observations accurately capture the status quo in communication and media studies, I submit there are notable and potentially promising disruptions that we

must also consider. In short, we must empower ourselves to explore and experiment, and be willing to embrace if and how the evolving modes of writing can serve all four writing functions.

In terms of the first function, they note that conference papers are helpful to get input and feedback from peers at the formulation and developmental stages of projects. And while that is true for large swaths of communication and media studies scholars, conferences serve a very different role for our colleagues in areas such as computer human interaction (CHI) and computer-supported cooperative work (CSCW). Scholars in these areas consider the CHI and CSCW conferences as the final (not preliminary) competitive destination for their scholarship.

Regarding the second function—sharing with their peers, insights in response to specific research questions—they argue that journals continue to be the coin of the realm. However, they observe that the size requirements for these journal articles is shrinking while the time cycle for the review process is not. But as we look across disciplines, we see room for disruption. Some of the most premier outlets for scientific (including social science) scholarship in the world, such as *Science*, *Nature*, and the *Proceedings of the National Academies of Sciences*, offer alternative models we should consider. They have single-digit page limit requirements for most of their articles (augmented by vast amounts of online supplemental information). And they have review cycles that are within two weeks (assuming one is not unfortunate to get a desk reject in hours—or in some cases, minutes). In the spirit of pluralization, there is no reason why communication and media studies can't include a venue, or at least an option at one of our current venues, that has the brevity (with provision for supplemental information online) and the short review time cycle offered by the aforementioned journals. For instance, *Management Science*, a premier journal of the Institute for Operations Research and Management Science (INFORMS), recently instituted a "fast-track" submission option (no more than 6,000 words with references) for "high quality, original and high-impact research" alongside their regular submission cycle. Admittedly we are not alone in being behind the curve. At an editors' panel at a recent computational social science conference, the then editor from *Science* told the audience that they should only consider submitting their work to *Science* if they could present the key insights of their research in 5 pages or less. She was followed on the panel by one of the coeditors of the *American Sociological Review* (ASR), the flagship journal of the American Sociological Association, who riffed on that request by telling the audience that they should only consider sending their work to ASR if they could expand their key insights to 35 pages or more! Our ecosystem in communication and media should accommodate both.

In terms of the third writing function—offer the scholarly community a more synthetic and/or holistic understanding of current or emerging social phenomena—they point to the preeminence of the book and the edited volume. The book "invites a degree of narrative playfulness that is often appreciated by the authors and the readers alike." Although they do note that reviewers and editors at journals might unintentionally thwart those who are using journal articles as a steppingstone toward a broader book-level argument. While they consider the writing of the book a fairly solitary process, with at most engagement with coauthors and peer reviewers, there are innovative and disruptive approaches to writing that scholars in communication and media studies scholars should explore. Consider the case of a book authored by sociologist Matthew J. Salganik, titled *Bit by Bit: Social Research in the Digital Age*, published by Princeton University Press in 2018. Salganik decided that in addition to the traditional peer-review process he would

make his manuscript in preparation available on the Web via Open Review—an open source annotation system (supported by a grant from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation) that enables any reader to leave feedback in the form of annotations. Salganik argued that this "crowdsourcing" improved the intellectual quality of the book, increased sales by targeting those who had contributed to the open-review process, and increased access to knowledge, including those in the Global South who might not have the means of purchasing the final published version. In contrast to the (co)authored book, the edited volume is ideally suited to coalesce and build community, identity, and credibility for emerging ideas—especially those are that not (initially) welcomed by editors at more "conservative" journals. However, a good volume requires editor(s) who Boczkowski and Delli Carpini refer to (in Latin) as the rare bird(s) who will embrace and excel at "editing-as-writing." To help augment the editor(s), we are witnessing another small but growing disruptive innovation—the convening of a virtual collaboration space punctuated with multiple face-to-face workshops where contributors to an edited volume intellectually engage with one another's ideas, thereby refining them and situating their individual chapters within a larger whole.

Finally, Boczkowski and Delli Carpini herald (with some measure of caution) the use of blogs and social media to accomplish the fourth function—repackage and share with the broader public insights in response to specific research questions or more synthetic/holistic perspectives. In some cases, the goal of this fourth function is to increase societal awareness and engage in a dialog with publics. In other cases, the goal is more explicitly to mobilize and lead action in support of certain causes. Frustrated by the potential "conservatizing effect" of the peer-review process, Boczkowski and Delli Carpini suggest that "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." While I agree with this statement, I am less sanguine on the universality of its potential benefits. Without the benefit of some modicum of scholarly vetting and peer review, do we risk contributing unwittingly to the spread of disinformation that consumes so much of our intellectual attention these days? While I share their frustration, I believe changes in shortening the time cycle of the peer-review process is a much more effective disruption in communication and media studies than going prematurely to the public without the benefit of peer review. A related disruption is for our journals, professional associations, and institutions to develop routines and structures to help authors translate (and in some cases coauthor or ghost write) their scholarship into general interest stories for public-facing outlets (such as the *Atlantic* and the *New Yorker*), popular blogs platforms (such as *Medium*), op-ed pieces in newspapers (such as *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post*), as well as international-facing media. While this assistance is offered at some of our elite institutions, it is not available to many communication and media scholars.

The essay by Boczkowski and Delli Carpini surfaces a couple of issues that transcend the four writing functions. They lament the fact that emerging scholars are being asked to do everything they were asked to do before in terms of number of publications, as well as all the new evolving modes of writing. The "do it all" scholar! That again doesn't have to be the case. While we should not expect scholars to participate in all the evolving modes of writing, we can do better to provide better access and support to those who would like to avail those opportunities. Further, to combat the "numbers (of publications) game," several schools are asking scholars to only submit what they believe are their top 5–10 publications for review when applying for a job, tenure, or promotion. A practice that should appeal to scholars and reviewers alike—and improve the quality of overall scholarship!

Finally, while not addressed in this essay, the most "modest" disruptive proposal on writing that should be on the minds of scholars in communication and media studies is the future business model for publishing under open-access policies. The field of communication and media studies, with the notable exception of the *International Journal of Communication,* which is hosting this dialog, has not been at the forefront of the move to open-access journals. And while there are many challenges and arguments along the way, discussions about open-access publishing have to factor in prognostications about the pluralization of writing practices.

## References

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