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Sinking the Flagship: Why Communication Studies Is Better Off Without One

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Does U.S. communication research have a flagship journal? Not really, if by flagship we mean something like the *American Sociological Review* or the *American Political Science Review*. Those are unquestioned flagships, ratified (in a self-reinforcing loop) by citation metrics and by the disciplines' tacit knowledge (Garand & Giles, 2003; Hargens, 1991; Oromaner, 2008). Ask a media studies scholar, and she *might* mention the *Journal of Communication*—but she could just as easily offer *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* or even *Cinema Journal*.[1] She wouldn't be wrong in any case. All four titles carry a major scholarly association's imprimatur.[2] What is odd, of course, is that there are four scholarly associations all claiming the same territory. If media and communication has no flagship, it is because there no coherent discipline in the first place.

Let's stipulate that there is no media studies flagship.[3] While our would-be discipline's problems run deep, my view is that this is no longer one of them. Maybe it is OK, in other words, that we do not have an organ to anoint the "best" stuff. There was always something problematic about the flagship idea

[1] Consider one measure of centrality, the h-index (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/H-index), used by Google Scholar Metrics (among others) to quantify a journal's citation-weighted influence. A journal's h-index is the largest number (*h)* such that *h* articles have at least *h* citations each, over the last five years. The number is 47 for the *American Sociological Review*, 54 for the *American Political Science Review*, and 122 for the *American Economic Review*. The *Journal of Communication*'s h-index, according to Google Scholar, is significantly lower (38), though the field's other would-be flagships are much lower still: *Quarterly Journal of Speech* (12), *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* (19), and *Cinema Journal* (10). See https://scholar.google.com/citations?view_op=top_venues&hl=en. Other quantitative measures (like the Eigenfactor or the Thomson Reuters Impact Factor) produce similar results.

[2] International Communication Association (*Journal of Communication*); National Communication Association (*Quarterly Journal of Speech*); Association for Education in Journalism & Mass Communication (*Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*); and Society for Cinema and Media Studies (*Cinema Journal*).

[3] The few studies that include communication research confirm this point (Anderson & Middleton, 2013, p. 9; Chang & Tai, 2005, p. 680; Leydesdorff & Probst, 2009, p. 1716; Paisley, 1986; Rice, Borgman, & Reeves, 1988, p. 278; So, 1988, p. 251).

anyway: It is too easy for a narrow agenda to seize the power to consecrate. (Just ask a sociologist.) But the main reason that we are better off without a flagship, after all these years, is that its good and valuable functions can be taken up elsewhere.

The flagship journal has served a pair of purposes, beyond the propagation of new research.[4] The first is to organize attention. There has always been too much to read (Blair, 2010), so most fields have delegated some of the wheat-chaff filtering to a leading journal. If you have time for nothing else, the promise was, *these* pieces deserve your attention. The logic of double-blind peer review, given a huge submission volume and a page cap, meant cream-lifting meritocracy. And the other purpose followed from the unblinded author credit: Here, the flagship proclaimed, are the researchers who deserve tenure and an NSF grant. The top journal bestowed validation that any fellowship and promotion committee could understand. Getting a piece into the *American Economic Review* promised future success.

But these two functions do not require a strict hierarchy of journals. The flagship—its century-long back file and brutal rejection rates—probably *was* a pretty good proxy for article quality.[5] A discipline, in theory, delegated its collective judgment to a council of editorial-board wise men, who filtered submissions through field-prevailing standards of excellence. But there was always something arbitrary about the power that this (traditionally male) group wielded. A quick glance at the history of any mainline social science shows that factional disputes, personal vendettas, and paradigm stalling were commonplace (e.g., Abbott, 1999; Hochschild, 2004; Lee, 2004; Steinmo, 2005). (Just ask a sociologist.) Even without such skullduggery, there is something flawed about the basic premise of the academic journal system. Why should the outlet stand in for the thing in question, the article? Maybe it needed to—maybe that was the best proxy on offer—but that is no longer true, or at least does not have to be.

There is no good reason for articles to stay tethered to the reputation of the journals they are published in. Scholarly articles are already coming unbundled: Most of us, most of the time, land on an article page through a "side door"—a Google Scholar search, an academia.edu alert, or even a Tweet. This language of unbundling and side doors is borrowed, of course, from the media industries, where editorial and artistic aggregations (like a newspaper's front page or a music album) are coming undone. While the mainstream media has some legitimate worries about, say, the loss of cross-subsidies for unsexy journalism, *scholarly* unbundling is almost certainly a good thing.

Consider the flagship journal. Top-shelf titles use artificial scarcity (issue page-length) and accumulated prestige to confer status on their contents. That works pretty well, but at what cost? Nearly all flagships, though nominally run by scholarly societies, are actually published by big commercial firms like Sage or Taylor & Francis. The reason that Springer and the others can extort our libraries for marquee titles—despite all the authorial and editorial labor that we have donated—is that these journals are thought to be indispensable. So we consent to the budget-breaking paradox—and it *is* a paradox in the

[4] See Owen (2007) for an excellent history of the flagship journal.

[5] Though, as George Lozano (2013) has documented, the flagship journal's quality-signaling fidelity has been in decline since the mid-1980s.

digital age—of paying obscene bills for the right to file our unpaid work behind a profit-maximizing paywall. It is true that Wiley, Elsevier, and the rest return some of this rent back to scholarly societies—which, in many cases, have grown dependent on these revenues. But that is not good enough: We should not be sealing off our scholarship from the public (and many of our colleagues around the world) so that our conferences can be subsidized. Maybe this enclosed-world model would make sense if the top journals remained the best way to signal quality and identify rising stars. But that just isn't the case anymore.

One alternative is the open-access journal, with or without the traditional quarterly-issue format. Since most open-access titles are very young, they cannot compete on prestige or name recognition—although the PLOS titles in the sciences, and even our own *International Journal of Communication* (http://ijoc.org), have come close with astonishing rapidity.[6] These titles still play in the old journal-reputation game, but submitting authors also expect faster review turnarounds and an uptick in reads and citations. They are right to expect both: Review *is* quick, and there is good proof that open-access pieces get cited more.[7]

The open-access journal is still recognizably a journal, and that's a good thing: It is a tested format, and articles need a place to live. But there are alternatives that deserve some consideration, including the so-called "mega journal." The phrase "mega journal" *sounds* terrible—like a cross between an Electronic Arts release and an Upworthy spin-off. But the idea is intriguing: a sprawling, open-access journal that takes submissions without regard to specialism, then sends articles out to qualified specialists. The review remains double-blind, but there is no artificial, page-limit backlog. If a paper deserves publication, then it gets published. The pioneer in this category is the natural-science *PLOS One* (http://www.plosone.org), run by the open-access nonprofit Public Library of Science. Another standout title is the for-profit, biomedical *Peer J* (https://peerj.com). There is now a mega journal for the rest of us, the *Open Library of Humanities* (https://www.openlibhums.org), which has just begun accepting submissions from social scientists and humanists.

There are good reasons to be wary of this trend. The most compelling objection to the mega journal is that *PLOS One* and its imitators charge "author-processing fees" that often climb into the thousands of dollars.[8] The phrase is a euphemism for an author-pays model: Instead of strangulating subscription payouts, *PLOS One* (and many other standard open-access journals too) shift the cost of publication to the submitting authors. It is no surprise that the whiff of pay-to-play hangs around the

[6] According to Google Scholar Metrics, the *International Journal of Communication* has the field's seventh-highest h-factor, at 26. See https://scholar.google.com/citations?view_op=top_venues&hl=en&vq=hum_communication.

[7] The research to date has mostly focused on the biomedical and physical sciences, where results have shown a modest citation advantage for open access (see McCabe & Snyder, 2014). A number of recent studies on *social science* OA publishing have all shown significant boosts in citations for open-access articles (Atchison & Bull, 2015; Donovan, Watson & Osborne, 2015; Wohlrabe & Birkmeier, 2014).

[8] Some of these fees are justified by the high costs associated with typesetting science and mathematics articles.

whole enterprise. Though the inference is not fair in the case of reputable outfits like PLOS, it is true that the lucrative economics of author-pay have enticed the big commercial publishers to establish rival mega journals like *Sage Open* (http://sgo.sagepub.com). Worse than legacy-publisher opportunism is the now-ubiquitous predatory journal (see http://scholarlyoa.com/publishers), whose faux-customized e-mail appeals prey on desperate or naive academics. These are the bottom-feeders of our publish-or-perish culture, and their legitimate-sounding titles, once exposed, deliver us back into the arms of the safe and prestigious flagship.

In the natural sciences, these steep author fees are often fronted by funders or universities, but social scientists and humanities scholars will not be so lucky. Or, to tilt the issue slightly, a few privileged non-scientists at rich, elite universities will have their fee covered, but the rest of us—notwithstanding fee-waiver policies at some mega journals—will be effectively barred. If open access comes with *this* price—widening cross-divisional and inter-university inequality—maybe we should just let Springer keep its fat, subscription-based profits.

Fortunately there is an ingenious alternative emerging, one that dispenses with author-processing fees altogether. The idea is to tap university libraries around the world for voluntary payments that, when combined, support a mega-journal's operations. The *Open Library of Humanities*—the social science and humanities mega journal—is trying it (https://www.openlibhums.org/2014/04/07/library-partnership-subsidies-lps), with promising traction already (https://www.openlibhums.org/2014/12/02/wellcome-trust-signs-up-to-olh-library-partnership-subsidy).[9] Libraries sign on to "fund" the open-access mega journal operations, in exchange for some say in how *OLH* is run. The libraries are not paying for access—the articles will be freely available, after all—but the idea is that relatively cheap subsidies might be more than offset by a drop in suffocating subscription costs. Everyone (except Elsevier) wins: no author fees, open scholarship, and (in theory) some relief for library budgets.

If this library-subsidy model works, the mega journal would still have a thorny problem. Is it not a bit silly, whatever the cost savings from sharing one big infrastructure, to publish articles on Keats and Kenyan macroeconomic policy in the same journal? Perhaps, as I have argued, the individual article needs a traditional journal like a fish needs a bicycle, but there *are* some benefits. Discovery, for example: We glance over the tables of contents (perhaps delivered by e-mail) for the titles that publish in our subfields. And journal editors are selected, presumably, for their specialist expertise and potential-reviewer networks.

It turns out that there is a solution-in-waiting for this problem too: the "overlay journal." In this model, standalone titles sit atop a mega journal's infrastructure (not unlike the way a "publication" like Backchannel lives within Medium.com). As an "overlay journal," the publication retains its own editor and editorial board and farms out reviews just like any other double-blind title. The mega journal handles the

[9] Something like this has already been piloted by the exciting Knowledge Unlatched project (http://www.knowledgeunlatched.org).

infrastructural backend: the submission process, typesetting, copyediting, alerting, and hosting. Let's say you start a *Journal of the Internet of Things* as an *Open Library of Humanities* overlay. Your journal would have full autonomy to review submissions and organize special issues, all of it published on your own, *OLH*-hosted site. In addition, depending on your preferences, you could "curate" relevant articles already published (and peer-reviewed) in the wider *OLH* mega journal. You would, in effect, incorporate those pieces into your *Journal of the Internet of Things*.

There's a lot of jargon here—"overlay," "mega journal," "library partnership subsidies"—and the underlying models remain unproven, at least in the social sciences and humanities.[10] It is not even clear, moreover, that the alternative to the tolled flagship sketched here would supply those two crucial functions that the flagships accomplish pretty well: identifying the best work, and signaling author quality. The flagships use exclusivity and accumulated prestige to consecrate the deserving few. The mega journal, publishing all work that passes review, has neither exclusivity nor reputational capital. How will the best stuff get sifted out?

The answer is that the sifting will happen *after publication*. In deciding what to read, we have always relied on word-of-mouth recommendations from respected peers. Informal endorsements, passed in the hallway or by Tweet, are a kind of quality barometer. We are all, in a sense, housewives from Decatur—opinion leaders relaying judgments to our scholarly small groups. But casual recommendations from trusted colleagues cannot be cited in tenure files, and they disappear into the ether (or Twitter stream). They are good to have, but we need something more.

The "more" will likely be some form of "post-publication peer review." The phrase is a catchall for platforms that encourage scholars to rate and comment on their peers' already published work. There are a number of thriving experiments underway in the natural sciences, from the upstart PubPeer (https://pubpeer.com) to ResearchGate's Open Review (http://www.researchgate.net/publicliterature.openreviewinfo.html) to the NIH-sponsored PubMed Commons (http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmedcommons). There are real differences between these platforms—PubPeer allows anonymous comments, while the others do not—but they all restrict participation to published scientists. It is the wisdom of the certified crowd.

The analogy to popular social media is obvious, and arguably troubling. Star ratings, "Was this comment useful?" tallies and up-votes: The whole post-publication enterprise starts to sound like a mash-up of Reddit, Amazon, and Tumblr. You half expect scholars to get voted off the island. Behind the queasiness, there is a real fear that a shallow, here-comes-everybody populism might come to dominate the way we allocate reputation. Yes, these post-publication review platforms are designed for conversational back and forth, but they are also visibility arbiters. Through simple rankings aggregation, or more complex sifting algorithms, the platforms—as they evolve—will almost certainly direct our

[10] Philip Pochoda (2013), the former University of Michigan Press director who led the publisher's digital makeover, has likened the current flux to a "bubbling digital soup" that has yet to evolve into a stable infrastructure (p. 370).

attention to a small number of standout papers. The result will be a rich-get-richer dynamic, an algorithmic version of what Robert Merton (1968) called the "Matthew effect": The highest-rated or "most shared" papers will be granted premium home-page placement—and garner still more attention as a result. It is easy (and painful) to imagine the next logical step: a pooled and weighted reputation rating for each and every scholar, something like a scholarly Klout score.

But before we get too huffy about attention-gathering algorithms, we should remind ourselves that the existing system—the flagship system—is arguably worse. There is no escaping the filter; there really is too much to know. No matter what, the ocean of scholarship must get sieved. It is a question, in the end, of which filters we choose. The flagship model asks us to trust an editor and his anonymous reviewers. The pieces that make it through are then displayed behind paywalled glass. That's fine, but there is something incestuous and self-consecrating about the flagships' small-world editorial networks. Maybe the articles that make it through deserve the spotlight, but we are relying on the blinded judgments of just two or three (presumably qualified) referees. Traditional peer review is good at determining whether a manuscript meets basic scholarly standards; blind review is a crucial first line of defense. But at flagships, reviewers do not just weigh in on publishable competence. They go much further: *This* paper is (or is not) among the field's very best. That is too much authority for a pair of reviewers to shoulder, even if we assume good faith and diligence.

None of the major post-publication peer review experiments dispense with traditional peer review. This is a crucial point: Manuscripts still get double-blind peer-reviewed. The big change is what comes *after* successful review. Publication, in this model, is a first step—an endorsement of baseline merit. The work of identifying what is *great* comes next, as a field's scholars weigh in with comments and ratings. The initial, blinded reviewers are indispensable gatekeepers, but they are not asked to distinguish the merely good from the truly excellent. In the post-publication model, that is left to the rest of us.[11]

We should, with open minds, start experimenting with new publishing systems that promise to decouple the assessment of article quality from the reputation of the publishing journal. Why stick with a blunt, one-size-fits-all seal of approval, tethered to journal prestige, when we can have article-specific judgments too? The old model has its merits, for sure—and any post-flagship future will come with its own bag of risks and drawbacks. At the very least, there will be trolls, sock puppets, and other evil-doers. And there may well be more rivalrous eye-gouging than ever, though at least attacks will be out in the open and answerable. Academics are a cranky and sensitive lot; any post-flagship model will be messy and imperfect.

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[11] It is true that post-publication reviewing will require still more labor on top of the already onerous pre-publication referee burdens we already carry. Indeed, it is possible to imagine tenure-review and promotion committees layering on this new expectation, that we all become avid post-hoc reviewers. That does sound exhausting, but the weight of the pre-publication gatekeeping will presumably lighten as the reviewer's task shifts to the baseline standard of publication worthiness. Even if more of our scarce time is spoken for, the benefits of a two-stage system justify the extra labor.

Maybe that is a reason to promote a variety of post-publication filters, none of which will arbitrate merit on its own (Acord & Harley, 2013, pp. 390–391). Download counts, Tweets, certified comments, shares, citations, ratings, hallway endorsements—all of these and more, a mix of the informal and formal, human-curated and algorithmic, alt-metric and traditional. Regardless, media scholars should take the lead. We specialize in communication, so the scholarly sort should interest us. We are trained to be on the lookout for, and critical of, the language, metaphors, and practices that will doubtlessly cross over from popular media and celebrity. And we have no flagship to sink.

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