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Habits, Canvases, and Conversations: How I Think about Publishing

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Abstract

This essay responds to an invitation by the editors of *Sociologica* to write about publication strategy. It outlines six suggestions for how to publish not just in sociology, but more generally. They are based on the author's own experience. Those suggestions are: (1) Write habitually; (2) Recognize and try out different canvases; (3) Don't reinvent the wheel; (4) Be part of a conversation; (5) Respond well to criticism. It concludes by outlining (6) Five perils to things to avoid.

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1 Introduction

I have written in a wide range of formats: for example, books (Khan, 2011), shorter versions of those books (Khan & Jerolmack, 2013), long articles (Accominotti, Khan, & Storer, 2018), short articles (Khan et al., 2018), long form "journalism" (Khan, 2015), long op-eds (Khan, 2012; 2013), short op-eds (Khan, 2016), and even, some time ago, regularly on a blog. I've also spent the last four years editing the journal *Public Culture*, and have edited special issues of other journals (Cousin, Khan, & Mears, 2018; Tahir & Khan, 2019). And I've written using a wide range of methods, from experiments (Schneiderhan & Khan, 2008), to historical analysis (Abu-Odeh, Nathanson, & Khan, 2019), to ethnography (Khan et al., 2018), to quantitative analysis (Mellins et al., 2018). The first, rather sobering realization I had upon being asked to write this piece was that I don't have a publication strategy. At best my approach might be called "pragmatic." But in practice and upon reflection it is far more experimental. I've never been terrible good at predicting how something is going to work until I try it. I have tried lots of different kinds of writing and in the process learned a good bit about how I think (writing is thinking for me). I have learned a lot about how to write and publish by doing it with others; most of my academic writing is co-authored. While the editors who solicited this piece of writing are, no doubt, most interested in my strategy for academic publishing, it also occurred to me that I could not make sense of my writing independent of the work I'd done writing for a non-academic audience. In this reflection I provide short bits of practical advice, divided by theme, which I hope will be useful for those just starting out in our profession, and those who have far more experience than I.

2 Before you Strategize: Write Habitually

Before you can strategize on how to publish you have to actually have to have words on a page. This is the subject of a wonderfully helpful previous issue (*Sociologica*, 1, 2018), but I want to return to it for a brief moment. Because in my experience the greatest challenge with publishing is not getting something published, it is writing something at all. My first bit of advice, then, is to write habitually. I find I can't think very seriously or intelligently for very long, and writing requires deep thinking. As a consequence, writing days are a waste of time. I can't think in that way for more than three hours, much less eight. My habit is to do two, maybe three 45-minute chunks of writing five days week. The greater the gap between the days the harder it is to write. That's because for me writing is in the re-writing. So the shorter the intervals between coming back to my text, again and again (I often write upwards of 100 drafts), the easier it is for me to remember what I was trying to do and then try to do it better. My first bit of advice, then, is not to write a lot. It's to write frequently. I get up early and write for a little under two hours, and if I'm in a grove, two and a half. But that's it. I take a 10 minute break between the 45 minute intervals where I usually pace around. I try not to lose my focus by looking at email at this time, or the internet. A wonderful consequence to this morning routine is that my day is done before I walk into my office. That is wonderfully liberating for the rest of the day. But how do I know what to write?

3 Recognize Canvases

Just as I was finishing my PhD, my doctoral supervisor, Mustafa Emirbayer, advised me to ask myself a simple question. "What is your canvas?" His career had been spent mostly writing articles. He had honed his skills through practicing within this canvas again and again, until he could reasonably be considered a master. His focusing on this particular kind of canvas wasn't rare. Indeed we often think of "book writers" and "article writers." The form of an article had a size that made certain kinds of arguments possible. Thinking of an argument as a "form" and recognizing that the structure of such forms allow for certain kinds of arguments has been a bit of a revelation. More so than the more pedestrian quip that there are book people and article people. Yes, people tended to write things of a particular size. Books are relatively big canvases (60,000–200,000 words); articles have a similar kind of size range (2,000–20,000 words). We might even add to this opinion pieces, which typically have canvases of around 750–1500 words. In the decade since I've completed my PhD I've found this question of my canvas enormously useful. To paint the *Sistine Chapel* is very different than to paint *View of Delft*. Both contain entire worlds, are masterpieces of detail and subtly and of many things left unpainted, and yet they are able to accomplish something similar in very different ways on radically different scales.

Yet as the example of painting indicates, the question of different canvases isn't a question of how much detail is allowed. In fact, articles are often far more detailed than books. They require, for example, more systematic coverage of the relevant literature and deployed methodology. Such details are (typically) "distracting" in books, and such in depth discussions are often avoided. There is, of course, a lot of variation we could point to. Some book canvases are densely packed with details. Other have a more relaxed, open feel to them. The distinction, then, is not so much the details as it is the potential set of forms that fit within articles as opposed to books.

The problem is that you don't know what your canvas is until try it out. At first I thought the canvas was the "size of the idea." But this isn't correct. My first book has three main points in it. I've written papers with far more (Hirsch et al., 2018). Instead of how "big" the idea is, you should think about it in geographic terms: what is the space I need for that particular idea to be understood. In order to figure that out, I suggest you think less about your own ideas, and more about others and what they need to receive your ideas. This brings me to my second recommendation.

4 Don't Reinvent the Wheel

The best way to figure out your canvas is to see how someone else has done it. While we often think of outlines as things we do before we write, I tend to do them after I have something written. It's difficult to see the structure of a work that's longer than about 1,000 words, and the things we write are often at least ten times this length. I turn text into outlines, rather than outlines into text.

But this practice generates a realization: you can also do this for someone else's writing. This is a frequent exercise I give to my students, and that I continue do myself. I think to myself, "I wish I could have written this paper," or, "I wish this terrible paper of mine were like this wonderful paper I love." When I feel this way, I reverse outline that other paper by that other author, to see its basic structure. It's like an analytic dissection which reveals something the whole body of text somehow obscures. After I've done this exercise I ask myself, "could I restructure my work to look like this?" This is a general writing strategy, but it's also a publishing one. It's often hard to imagine what your paper could be. But it's easy to see what an actual already published paper is. Find one that's closely tied to your own work, reverse outline it, and then see if you can restructure your own work to mirror this successful model. Once you've done this, send it to where that paper was published.

5 Be Part of a Conversation

Your job as a scholar is to contribute to the general knowledge. Take that word seriously. Contribute. This is not the same as critiquing. You should have far more citations to friends than to enemies. You're not entering a shouting match. If you can avoid it, don't have enemies at all. Think, for a moment, about a dinner party. Imagine that you invited me and I told you that your home was poorly decorated, your food subpar, your other guests boring, and your outfit old and tired. Or imagine instead, if I told you had a lovely home, that you looked wonderful, that it was a joy to be part of the conversation, and that I had a lovely side dish recipe I'd like to give you that would pair well with the lovely dinner you served. Which contribution to the evening would you appreciate, and want to hear more from, perhaps even invite again? The one that insulted you, or the one that sought to build upon and be part of your community?

What I'm suggesting is not that you be fake. Instead it's that you focus on the more positive aspects of community, and seek to add to its conversations not by telling everyone every problem you see, but instead, providing something that might improve the community overall. Other scholars work very hard trying to develop understandings of the world and contribute to conversations about those understandings. You job is to join rather than ruin the conversation.

Conversations have different characters. My dinner parties with my queer community in New York tend to be a little more raucous than those with my colleagues. Neither community would particularly appreciate my bringing the conversation style from the other to the dinner table. What does this long analogy mean? Recognize the conversation you want to join. Be generous with the existing conversation. Recognize and appreciate the voices of others.

I have written one set of papers that were rather critical of conversation (Jerolmack & Khan, 2014a; 2014b). But it was a conversation I'd been a part of for some time. And I would not recommend making a habit of this style of writing; it should be used sparingly, and I would suggest, after you'd already made a few contributions to the conversation on its own terms. Most of all, joining a conversation means not just thinking about what you want to say. It means thinking about what others have said, and what is useful for them to hear. Your aim in publishing is not to monologue. It is to dialogue. And that means that as you write you should think as much about how people will hear what you're saying as what it is you want to say. More prosaically, write for your reader, not for yourself. Your reader is a community. That community tends to have a space where they work. Recognize those spaces, what the conversations are there, what the kind of dialogue looks like, and try to publish by mirroring this. The best way to do this is to say something that constructively helps them do what they're trying to do (rather than something that tears them down).

6 Responding to Criticism

First let's get this out there: most of my submissions are rejected. I'd say I have to send work to 2–3 journals before it's published. My "hit rate" is probably around 30–40%. We're not in the publication business; we're in the rejection business. And you have to try and try again to get things published. That's life for pretty much all of this.

Rejection or revision, I hate getting reviews back. They always make me angry. First at the reviewers. Next at the editor. And finally, if I'm being honest, at myself. The first big step for me when dealing with a revision is managing my emotional response. I usually read the reviews. Get angry. Put them aside. Read them again. Get angry. Put them aside. And then get to work. The first thing I do is create a chart with three columns. Each row corresponds to a statement the editor or reviewer made. The first column is small. It's just where a comment came from: the editor, reviewer A, reviewer B, etc. The second is bigger. It's the text of what the person said. I arrange these by theme, and usually color-code those themes (I highlight these themes in response memos, and often have one theme "miscellaneous" for things I couldn't categorize). The third column is initially for me. It's the steps I've taken to address the reviewer comments. This includes where my addressing them appears in the manuscript with a bit of text about what I've said, or, a short justification as to why I don't address the comment. I always address the vast majority of the comments. The first purpose of this chart is to make sure I deal with all the comments.

What gets me over my irrational and/or emotional reactions to reviews is the recognition that reviewers are doing massive amounts of unpaid work to make our scholarship better. Add to that my drive to publish the work I've spent so long writing, and I typically revise within a month or so. In my experience the most important part of the revision is the response (not the new text). The response should do three things. First, the response memo should re-articulate the main argument of the paper, pointing to additional clarity provided through the review process. Second, the response memo should acknowledge and appreciate the work of the reviewers, and do the job of categorizing that work by theme, instead of responding point by point. I also highlight the specific passages where the manuscript has changed given the themes of the reviews. This is where the chart I make comes in. The memo graciously hits on the big points; the chart gets into the gritty details.

Finally, when responding to reviewers, don't do things you don't want to just to get published. This foreshadows one of the things I suggest you avoid. Your job is not to get something published. It is to say something useful for a group of scholars involved in a conversation. Responding to reviewers doesn't mean doing what they want. It means asking yourself why someone read your paper in the way that they did, and, exploring ways you might avoid having future readers getting caught up on the same issues. The privilege of my position may allow me to be naively Weberian in thinking of our enterprise as a vocation. But I tend to avoid changes just to get published. It's not about sticking to your guns. It's about staying true to the contribution you want to make. I sometimes point that out in my memos: that there remains some disagreement between myself and the reviewer, and this is fine. Healthy communities feel comfortable disagreeing with respect, and do future work to resolve those disagreements.

7 Things to Avoid

I end with the five perils of publishing. There are, no doubt, more than five. But if I could stamp things out these five would be high on my list.

(1) LPUs.

"What is an LPU?," you might ask? It's the "least publishable unit." And it is a horrible way to write. For some it's a strategy, "How do I divide this project into the least publishable units so that I can publish as much as possible from it?" This might be good for you, but it's not good for a conversation, because it means that insights happen in fragments. Publish what's logically coherent, not what is likely to produce the most lines on your CV.

(2) Not every paper needs a New Theory of the World

If every paper has a new theory, theory can't advance. Instead, papers can be "just" description, helping us better understand the world with the theories we already have. A different way of putting this is that you should think less about your theory, and more about your findings — presenting them clearly and getting them right. Few of us will ever have a field-changing idea. And if we do we probably aren't aware of it. It's not the idea that changes the field, it's what others do with it. Lots of field changing ideas are never realized, and some ideas that aren't that radical are mobilized by others to make them revolutionary. You will never have an important idea; others will make it so. There's an important consequence of this: when you read the papers of others, please, stop writing reviews that ask for new theory. As I've said before, we're a discipline that could benefit from "Less Theory. More Description" (Besbris & Khan, 2018).

(3) Perfection

You'll never write the perfect paper. Instead of trying to do this, highlight your own weaknesses. It defangs reviewers and liberates you from the necessity of feeling like every bit has to be tied off perfectly. You have responsibility to a community, not to your own interest in publishing. And so instead of burying your failures — trying to hide them — raise them up. This has three major benefits. It will free you of the feeling that every paper has to be perfect. It will eliminate those annoying "gotcha" moments of review writers and critics. And it will help your readers better understand your own ideas — not just their strengths, but their limits. This allows readers to see where they might join your conversation to improve upon the weaknesses you highlight in your own work.

(4) Cleverness

Resist the temptation to prioritize cleverness over correctness. There's nothing worse than scholarly work that would rather be clever than right. The scholarly enterprise should be fun. It should excite. But it is also of enormous consequence. There's a responsibility to producing ideas that improve our capacity for human understanding. "Cuteness" can be a happy consequence of a project, but it shouldn't take precedence over the drive to be correct.

(5) Self-serving strategies

Never publish anything you aren't convinced is correct. You can later change your mind. But in the moment you must believe what you're saying. A variant of this is never publish anything because you can.

All of this is to say that you should only deploy a publication strategy after you've done what is necessary for any and all projects: earnestly, sincerely, and honestly tired to make sense of something in the world, and join a conversation of people who will be interested in hearing about that.

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