

Seismic Shift: Metrics, Media and Marketing and the changing world of journals

Taylor & Francis Workshop

3rd October 2013, National Railway Museum, York

Social Media and Metrics, a journal Editor's view

Dr Liz Richardson, Editor, Local Government Studies; Senior Lecturer, University of Manchester; Visiting Fellow, LSE; Director, National Communities Resource Centre.

Dr Catherine Durose, Editor, Local Government Studies; Senior Lecturer, Director of Research, Institute of Local Government Studies, University of Birmingham.

TRANSCRIPT

Catherine Durose

[START] Hello everybody. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. I feel I have learnt a lot so far from the different presentations. My name is Catherine Durose, I am Director of Research at the Institute of Local Government Studies at the University of Birmingham, and I am also Editor of *Local Government Studies* with my colleague Liz Richardson who is Senior Lecturer in Politics at the University of Manchester. So, what are really going to do today is to try to share some of our experiences with you that we have had since we started being journal editors, and hopefully some of that will resonate. We are relatively new to this; we only started editing our journal at the beginning of this year, and so really one of the values... one of the opportunities that we have had in coming here was really to be part of a conversation and to be part of an editorial community. Editing a journal can sometimes feel like quite an overwhelming and quite a lonely thing, so it is nice to be in a room of people who are maybe going through the same things.

Okay, so just to let you know a little bit about our journal. *Local Government Studies* is an inter-disciplinary journal; we work across public administration, public policy, social policy, political science. We try our best to focus on high quality articles. By that I mean theoretically informed and challenging, methodologically innovative, empirically resonant and comparative. We look at local government and governance, so from local politics, elections, community action, local institution and policy. I think – though I’m sure that Helen who is our administrator at the back over there can correct me if I’m wrong – but we are a journal that seems to get a high frequency of submissions; around 200 over the year. And an increasingly international number of submissions. We used to be very focused on the UK, increasingly Europe, but now much more broadly internationally. And the journal will celebrate its 40th anniversary next year, so we are a journal that has been long-standing.

As I have said, we have been authors for a number of years but we only became editors at the start of 2013, so I’m just going to talk a little bit about some of the things we have tried to do to innovate the journal and to get more involved in social media. So we try to concentrate in terms of strengthening in three core areas. The first is around the editorial refereeing process, and really that is in terms of the timeliness and quality. One of the things that we noticed quite a lot is that we receive a lot of emails going ‘Where’s my article? Where are we up to?’ and how the iFirst system that Taylor & Francis now operate has been really useful in ensuring the timeliness; that stuff is getting out quite quickly, but also it is really important for us in terms of fostering the relationships with the publishers, with our authors; you know, we are not building up any resentment, there is a sense, you know, that they publish with us, they choose to submit to our journal then there will be something that is turned around quickly and there is a timeliness to it. But also in terms of quality. We have been trying to drive up quality. We have been trying two different things to do that. The first is around broadening and strengthening the pool of referees. As new editors we have been able to draw in our contacts, our personal contacts, but we have sought to broaden that and build relationships with referees, recognising that we were not the only people asking for their time and that their time is voluntary. A lot of people will be doing this out of work hours and really we are asking for favours. And so the way in which we communicate that is really about trying to build a relationship and show how much we really value referees because we simply could not run the journal without them.

The second element is really around trying to be more proactive in terms of soliciting content. So that can either be in terms of commissioning; so for our 40th anniversary we have actively commissioned a combination of really established scholars but also some rising stars who we think have got interesting things to say. And also trying to

act in a more ambassadorial way for the journal and we are going to be encouraging our editorial board increasingly to do that: so to go out and almost talent spot papers that seem interesting, articles that, you know, and go and say to them 'Would you like to publish in *Local Government Studies*?' The experience of doing that in the last conference season in the last year since we started has been really positive, particularly with early career researchers. It is something that has really got conversations going, and those relationships we can use going forward as referees as well.

And the comment from earlier on about paying attention to titles and abstracts, I feel like I spend a lot of my time saying 'How about calling your article something like this...? This abstract doesn't really seem to tell me the distinctive contribution of your article' and I think I write that on every single article that we... that either goes back with minor revisions or looks like we are likely to accept. And that is something I did not anticipate spending a lot of time on. So some of the guidance that is coming out on how to write a good title and how to write a good abstract has been really helpful and hopefully means that I will spend less of my time going 'How about calling your article this...?'

The second element in terms of strengthening the article has been around the editorial board; our editorial board has been quite long-standing and we were eager to kind of freshen that up. We have a lot of established academics but we were keen to recruit people, rising stars. We have done that either through reputation, personal networks but also people who have published in the journal and it has been really well cited and have been success stories and we wanted to keep that relationship going. Increasingly internationalised to reflect where we are getting articles submitted from. And another point, of gender balance: *Local Government Studies*, or the field that we are in, has traditionally been very male-dominated. I don't think that is really the case anymore and we want our editorial board to reflect the gender balance within the field. Also to draw in different voices into the journal that might enable us to reach different audiences in different ways.

So, to the editorial team. Liz and I have known each other for a long time. We work together, we write together, and that's been really helpful to have that relationship at the core of the journal. But we are hoping to lighten the load by recruiting a couple of other editors over the next year. But most relevant to this discussion is that we have appointed an Associate Editor for social media. That is not to say that we are trying to absent ourselves from that responsibility, but simply because... I think there are more hours in your day than there are in my day [to Andy Miah]. We were keen to get somebody who was really motivated, really enthusiastic and savvy to hopefully inspire other people. And so we have recruited my colleague Stephen

Jeffares who is at the University of Birmingham whose work has been around Social media, whose personal research has been about Social Media and so we think he is well positioned. So, some of the things that we have done, and I have to say that I was really inspired by what Andy said too. I've got a long list for Jeff when I go back to see him tomorrow of things that he might want to do. But some of the things that we have started to do, are to, so I work at the Institute of Local Government Studies and we have a really lively blog and Twitter account that's already set up. And we thought that it wasn't really worth reinventing the wheel because the brand of the journal... the journal has always been at home in that Institute and we have a really shared audience. So, we have tried to piggyback and hopefully add value to their efforts. So, we've been inviting authors who have work coming out in the journal to maybe contribute a blog. The virtual special issues that we're going to be convening to write them to blog. And I noticed in the pack the article on Trust and Authority was saying that blogging is not always attractive to academics so a nudge helps. But people have responded really positively to doing that. They seem to have liked the idea of being encouraged to get their work out in a different way and that we are interested in something that is thoughtful and thought-provoking; it is not a compromise of their scholarship, it's just a way of being able to access it in a different way. We've been using HootSuite, I think that is the name of the software, to program tweets; so, rather than just expecting someone to just be available to tweet at, you know. Most people, I just got the impression that most people seem to maybe check their Twitter on the train on the way home or maybe at the weekend, so maybe that is the time we need to have conversations. I am not advocating that we work on a Saturday afternoon, I am advocating that we program it in advance so that the conversation is able to go on all of the time.

One thing that has always been really crucial to our journal has been the link with practitioners. What that has traditionally meant is that we have had very practice driven and focused articles. We are conscious that we don't necessarily want to maintain that as a direction of the journal; we are interested in moving towards more academic content but the link with practice is incredibly important to us. We are also concerned – and I don't know if this is the right thing to say at a Taylor & Francis event – that really expecting people in local public services that are really being constrained and hit with cuts probably aren't going to be subscribing to journals. So that's what the priorities are. Instead, we've been trying to trial free content; so, we're going to have free content around the 40th anniversary, but also thematic stuff: so around financial crisis; dealing with austerity; public finance, etcetera. And so this is just another way of beginning a conversation about the journal.

Liz Richardson

So I just wanted to do something slightly different to build on what Catherine said. You can see we're trying really hard. We're working really hard to work within the existing metrics and increase our reach and readership. We were asked to do a presentation from our perspective as editors and this is the real deal; so these are our genuine dilemmas as editors also as researchers and authors. There is a bigger picture here about the metrics, the current metrics that we have. So, we are concerned for the profession overall, and particularly our own disciplines, political science and public administration. We are very conscious that there is this broader trend of a backlash by research funders, by governments against academic research, which has become overly specialised, inward-looking, and occasionally bites the hand that feeds. We have already talked this morning about Open Access, and part of that discussion is a narrative around value for money for the tax payer and the social responsibility of academia. So, in the UK we are moaning about REF Impact, but we are also looking very nervously over to the US, where we have just seen this year large cuts in research funding to the Humanities of around 50% for next year's budget. There have also, more worryingly, been some attempts in Political Science to restrict funding for Political Science research only if it promotes national security or US economic interests. So these attacks on research funding are very crucial and part of the bigger picture, the concepts we are working in. So, David [Green] mentioned this morning that if we don't have subscriptions, we won't have journals to give away so Open Access is a big issue. But equally, if we don't have research funding, we might not have any projects to produce papers on.

So politics - we would say this as political scientists – but the politics of this debate, I think, suggests the need to genuinely try to engage more with the world and communicate science to wider audiences. I mean that for Social Sciences and also there is a parallel debate in the natural sciences, with citizen science becoming more and more important. So, I think it goes across. So, what that means for us, as editors, is actually a major dilemma. What we do to increase citations and what we do to try and help research to change the world are two very different strategies. It crystallises for us in possibly this debate about dissemination or impact. So when we talk about engagement and reach it's all great because it's all muddled up together, but actually they are two very different things.

So just taking REF Impact as an example, the criteria for REF impact are that your Impact work has to be underpinned by peer reviewed academic work. Brilliant. But because it's a very crude metric for public engagement, and also there is very little incentive for individual academics to do a REF Impact submission – I don't know if anyone else has done one, I wouldn't do it again, no way. I got a thank you from my head of department; I'm like "Can I have a promotion now?" "No!" To be honest, if I

knew what I know now then, what I would have done is I would have said “I’m not doing one; I’m going to beef up my individual submission, I’m going to start tweeting, get my name around, gather citation stuff, I want to join the self-referential circle where we all eat ourselves, brilliant!

So that’s from the academic point of view. From, the practitioner’s point of view, either the people we work with, so we’re in York which is brilliant because I’m currently working with York Council. They got hold of some work that me and Catherine did and they went “It’s brilliant, we’d really like to use these ideas to help fundamentally reshape our relationship with citizens.” “Oh, my God, we’ve created a monster!” Anyway, so that’s great. At no point did the head of service, the lead politician, the chief exec, nobody has asked me was it even published, let alone what journal was it published in, what was the Impact Factor. They just loved the ideas, forget that.

We do have some users, or partners, for example central government, they tend to be a bit more savvy and they do want to know that it is high quality research that is guaranteed by the standards of our profession, but to be honest, they are actually quite sophisticated information consumers and they don’t use the crude proxies of the journal title, they go more for the modern style of they check the methodology, they look at it in detail and they make their own judgement about quality. So, what I’ve concluded from that, from both sides, is that neither side has an incentive to do engaged scholarship: so either scholarship that’s engaged, that REF Impact thing, or scholarly work because the practitioners don’t necessarily always care about it in the same way that we do. So, you’ve got this sort of tension really for us, as editors about whether we go for the instrumental dissemination – get product, throw out at the back end just by dumbing it down a bit, oh sorry, we call it ‘writing in human’ or triple-writing, and we sell, just sell the product. That’s fine. In an instrumental way, that’s great, you know. Some academics have large egos, some don’t, getting your name around, that’s a good thing, but that’s in stark contrast, really, to the idea of Impact, which in our experience actually takes a long time to build relationships, to really engage with our research users at the very beginning, so there’s a real fundamental difference in model of how we do research; the differences between knowledge transfer (we do it, we just give it to you) or somehow having more participation in knowledge production. So that’s a really big question.

So yes, as Catherine mentioned, we’ve taken over the journal and we’re going to try and move some of the content onto a more scholarly basis so it’s more theoretically grounded and we have fewer single case-study practice based articles, because we want to get our citations up. But what that means is that we’re going to actually have quite a contradictory editorial statement, aren’t we. So we’re going to say “You lot,



get more scholarly! Oh, by the way, we really want you to engage because we think we have a responsibility to the world.” We haven’t written this yet so that’s going to be our next job. [FINISH]