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The Surprising Value of Regional Journals in International Media and Communication Research and Publishing

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Abstract

What are the current issues facing academic journals, especially those with regional and national identities and bases? This paper reflects on how the opportunities, issues, and challenges for regional journals to make consequential, quality, and widely received contributions to media and communication research and debates. Offering an Australian perspective, this paper discusses the tensions and imperatives of regionally located journals, subtended by situated research cultures, histories, and institutions, as they seek to engage with and publish for an increasingly distributed, networked, and stratified international field of media and communications. If managed successfully, such regional locations offer resources and models for a genuinely cosmopolitan, widely and fairly available academic publishing ecology.

Keywords: academic journals; media and communications research; regions; Australia

Introduction

Internationally, a dominant discourse has emerged concerning academic research and publishing. Briefly, academics across many disciplines are expected to publish in top quality publishing outlets — especially top journals. Various national research funding regimes reinforce this imperative, by seeking to establish — by direct or indirect measures, or forms of divination — the ranking and relative merits of journals. As universities and research operate in international networks and systems of collaboration and competition, such hierarchies of value operate alongside, in conjunction with, or, at times, in conflict with governmental regimes.

For their part, disciplines have long been involved in economies of value about the desirability of particular journals. There is a long history to scholarly journals, initiated in the mid-17th-century (Shapin & Schaffer, 1985), as part of scholarly publishing — in turn forming part of scholarly communication. As argued by Lagoze et al., such scholarly publishing can be understood as “*infrastructure* — a combination of technologies, policies, human actors, and social norms” (Lagoze et al., 2015, after Bowker & Star, 1999). In such infrastructure, journals have been shaped by the influence, in particular, of key agents: “scholars, universities, publishers, librarians, learned societies” (Lagoze et al., 2015, p. 1058).

An important new thread in the conditions and conversations on academic publishing is associated with the emergence of digital platforms which potentially support new options — especially with the conjunction of new models for ownership

and circulation of ideas, in the form of open access (Lagoze et al., 2015; Suber, 2012). There are a complex range of issues and factors condensed into this overall scene — akin to a doxa — of contemporary academic journals. Also the scholarship on these directions in research as well as academic publishing and journals, in particular, is both substantial and inconclusive. Suffice to say, however, that this view of the international environment is widely shared.

What is submerged from view in this scenario is the way that many — if not most — of the “top” journals are still much still nationally and regional based. Further, that their “social imaginaries” of what constitutes good, publishable research are often bounded by quite specific national and regional academic communities, and intellectual formations. In a way, this comes as no surprise: after all, place, locality, and geopolitics has always mattered — and indeed been generative — in academic life. The idea of the university carries international aspirations: that the best ideas, and research, know no boundaries, and can be distributed, translated, and appreciated in other locales. Yet intellectual traditions, customary and framing assumptions, approaches, methods, and concepts are obviously rooted in particular settings. As the field of media and communications broadens, and develops around the world, there is overdue recognition of the many places outside the North American and European metropolises where distinctive research develops.

Part of the fun is exactly the way that ideas, and people, travel across places, and become transplanted. The terms upon which such exchanges occur — and the bridges, connective tissues, and infrastructures that make them possible — have received increasing attention, but still remain fraught. For instance, researchers in many countries where international circulation and endorsement of scholarship is now a key priority have come under pressure — and often feel disadvantaged — in publishing in the top international journals, where they face the issues of language (English typically regarded now as the dominant language of international academic publishing), networks, and tacit knowledge in terms of what research counts, and how it should be framed. I have had two recent experiences of being contacted by scholars in different regions (South America, and China), who have been instructed by their university administrators to only publish in Thomson-ISI Web of Science listed journals — but, without having yet done so for the first time, find the odds stacked against them. Globalization, the Internet, social, mobile, and locative media, and the digital age, may well be bywords; yet when it comes to international academic journal publishing spaces, we still face “uneven geographies”, as one account noted a decade ago (Passi, 2005).

Against this backdrop, then, I offer a short reflection upon the recent experience of academic journal publishing in Australia. I am also informed by discussions with colleagues in Aotearoa New Zealand who are equal partners of the Australian and New Zealand Communication Association (ANZCA), the peak scholarly body in our region. In this article, however, I discuss the specific issues and dynamics shaping academic journals in the Australian context. In particular, I look at the notable ways that Australian-based journals have sought to surmount their challenges and parley their national and regional perspective into international audiences, along the way engaging with, and joining forces with, international publishers, distributors, and

institutions. Rather than this being simply an *Australian case*, or *Australian story*, I argue that this experience can best be understood as one of a set of regional responses. What this means for international media and communications research is that we need to do a better job of understanding, supporting, integrating, and, most of all, valuing regional journals — if our field is to prosper.

Antipodean Journal Landscape

What does the contemporary landscape for scholarly journals in media and communications research — and related areas, especially cultural studies — look like in Australia? It is fair to say that the shifts in global journal publishing is somewhat woven in with the transformations in distribution, reading habits, research practices, universities, libraries, and scholarly associations.

A number of the large commercial journal publishers relevant to the media and communications field have small offices, staff, or presence, in Australia. Notably, Taylor & Francis maintains a Melbourne office and publishes various Australian-titled journals across the humanities and social sciences, including *Australian Geographer*, *Musicology Australia*, *Australian Feminist Studies*, *Australian Journal of Linguistics*, *Australian Historical Studies*, *Australian Cultural History*, and *Journal of Australian Studies*. Taylor & Francis also publishes significant Australian-based journals — journals like *Communication Research & Practice* that are edited in Australia, and supported by Australian or regional scholarly association. For instance, the *Asian Studies Review*, which was previously the *Asian Studies Association of Australia Review*, has substantial regional coverage in terms of expertise across Asian studies — with a wide range of locations represented in its international editorial advisory board; but the majority of its editorial roles are concentrated in Australian universities. Similarly, *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* publishes authors from across the world, but remains strongly led by its Australian-based (or expatriate Australian) editors — and fosters a close association with its affiliated Cultural Studies Association of Australasia.

For its part, Sage also publishes a number of Australian titled or based journals, including *Asia-Pacific Media Educator*, *Australia & New Zealand Journal of Criminology*, *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, and the *Journal of Sociology*, with *Media International Australia* likely to join its lists in the near future. Sage also publishes a small number of explicitly nationally or regionally associated journals such as the *European Journal of Communication*. Other potential international publishers in media and communication — such as Wiley and Elsevier — have no Australian-related or originated media and communications journals.

As is evident from this brief discussion, in recent times Australian journals have been quite successful in being adopted by international commercial publishers — connected to the influence of Australian research in media and cultural studies, especially, internationally (on this topic, see Goggin, Andrejevic, & Pertierra, 2015). Doubtless this achievements in scholarly journal publishing is also underpinned by the strength of the humanities and social sciences sector in Australia generally (Turner & Brass, 2014). However, there remains a whole ecology of scholarly journal publishing in Australia that connects unevenly to the international realm. One of

main issue here is that there are few regional alternatives to the “majors” — that is, the big international commercial academic presses.

The Australian university presses have largely vacated the scholarly journal area, following some uneven experimentation with online journal publishing. The most substantial Australian university press in terms of platform and business model is likely RMIT Publishing, responsible for its Informit brand. Informit has published journals, notably from 2001-2011, *Communication, Politics & Culture* (CPC) (started as *Southern Review* in 1963). From 2011, CPC has been published by the School of Media and Communication at RMIT, and is now an open-access journal. RMIT Publishing and Informit are best known for their indispensable databases and collections of Australian research, policy and law, information across key areas such as education, government, public affairs, and business. So many small Australian journals are indexed, and available through the Informit platform. In this sense, RMIT Publishing is an regional aggregator of content, alongside its global counterparts such as GALE (CENGAGE) and EBSCO.

Elsewhere in Melbourne, the rebirthed *Australian Journal of Telecommunications and the Digital Economy* is published on a subscription model by the TelSoc, with assistance from Swinburne University’s online journal’s division. This journal was created from the wreckage of the longstanding *Telecommunications Journal of Australia* (TJA). What occurred was that after many years of independent print publisher TJA had an ill-fated merger with the Australian Computer Society, that for a time saw it published by Monash University ePress, again on a subscription model. For its part, *Cultural Studies Review* has successfully transitioned from a print-based, subscription model to an fully open-access e-journal, published by University of Technology Sydney ePress.

For a time, *Media International Australia* (MIA) continued publishing its print edition, based in Brisbane, with the support of the University of Queensland. As well as making available PDFs of article to subscriptions on its own website (courtesy of the University of Queensland), MIA also contracted with Informit to publish the journal digitally (as well as digitizing all backlist issues of the journal) for a short period of time. After recurrent discussions, MIA will finally publish with one of the majors from 2016 (see also the corresponding article by Lee and Turnbull in this issue).

While it is arguably difficult to undertake a full examination of the vicissitudes of Australian-based journals, suffice to say here that journals which started life in print struggle to maintain independent or university-based publishing in current conditions. Much more successful are journals inaugurated as online publishing ventures. Such journals also tend to be open access, not having to contend with the legacy business models. For instance, we have seen: *M/C Journal*, established in 1998 and supported by QUT in Brisbane; *Transformations* (<http://www.transformationsjournal.org/>), commenced in 2000 by Warwick Mules, then at Central Queensland University; and, the *Australian Humanities Review* (<http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/>), open access since 2006 and associated with ANU ePress (allowing it to experiment in print-on-demand format, as well as PDF) and recently joined Open Humanities Press. An influential journal in the area of new media has been *Fibreculture Journal* (FCJ) (<http://fibreculturejournal.org/>), which was established in 2003 and has been

international in its contributors and content. FCJ has adopted the open access formula, becoming part of Open Humanities Press in 2009.

From this brief discussion of the landscape, the picture that emerges of scholarly journals in communications and media in Australia is variegated. There are many successful journals, some with longevity and international recognition. Most of the older journals have struggled in different ways to make their way in the altered conditions of scholarly publishing. Like the *Australian Journal of Communication* (AJC), some have brought to a close, or petered out. In the case of the AJC, its impending closure had opened up space for the reimagining of what a regional journal might look like — in the form of this journal, *Communication Research & Practice*. Other Australian journals are finding their way with assuming new formats and identities with online, open access publishing. Some are trying their luck with subscription-based online models. Others have signed up with the majors. The generation of new Internet-based open access journals established from the late 1990s onwards have included prominent, widely appreciated stayers.

All in all, the scholarly publishing ecology in Australian has been enriched in many ways, despite coming on hard times. If this snapshot gives a rough bill of health of scholarly publishing in Australia, what lies ahead — and what are the issues journals are confronting? Crucially, by what measures and regimes are Australian scholarly journals valued? And if we care for their futures, can might we value them differently?

Markets, Ranking, and Open Ideas

While research is international, and scholarly journals operate in transnational markets as much as global circuits these days, the matrix in which regional journals take their shape, resources, energy, and purpose faces distinct challenges.

In Australia, as many other countries, the specific conditions of education arrangements and funding play a determinative role. Under the present Abbott Liberal-National Party Coalition conservative government, the role for the market in higher education is being deepened. In March 2015, its signature reforms to deregulate student fees were defeated in the Parliament. However, on various fronts, market reforms are likely to proceed. If Australian universities are eventually permitted to raise student fees, this may lift the revenues of some universities — with unclear implications for the humanities and social sciences in particular. Thus the disciplines which enable media and communications research have already been under-funded in the past two or so decades, and face further uncertainty. Ironically media and communications itself in Australia has been in a boom period, which is now over. Notwithstanding this period, the support of universities for scholarly journals waned, with recognition for the labour of editing unreliable and patchy at best, and funds to support journals dwindling (with rare exceptions often tied to the desire to be associated with a journal to cultivate research lustre).

Inset in the broad, neoliberal arrangements of Australian higher education is the specific development of the research quality agenda. This agenda is an emblem of individual university, and national system-wide, prestige, and a marker in the

discourses of global competition, ranking and differentiation among universities. This has become a diffuse, pervasive, and internationally distributed phenomenon. It provides the ambiguous social imaginary, which is then articulated to a specific evaluation exercise — with a tricky measurement task. The evaluation involves a redoubled focus on the *value* of particular journals, what the hierarchy is among them, and which journal should be preferred — or prescribed — as the top journals. In the field of media and communications, uneasily (though often exhilaratingly) astride the humanities *and* social sciences, there are shifts about whether publishing in journals is now to be given greater value, and thus a higher priority, than publishing books, and, most certainly, fugacious book chapters.

In our region, the *value* discourse on journals has centred on the research quality regimes: namely, the Australian Excellence Research Australia (ERA) exercise undertaken by the Australian Research Council (ARC), and the New Zealand Performance-Based Research Fund (PBRF), discussed in Kay Weaver's article in this issue (Weaver, 2015). In the Australian ERA, journals, especially media and communications journals, initially experienced a fair bit of turbulence in how they fared (Redden, 2008). First, the ARC tried to rank all scholarly journals, as either A*, A, B, or C. As this proved exceedingly difficult in fields where citation metrics are neither stable, well-established, nor plausible (Burrows, 2012) when the ARC realized that the expertise to do such ranking — if it were possible — lay in the disciplines themselves, it called for tenders to understand the exercise. While the tender bids were under consideration, the ARC decided in May 2011 that discretion was the better part of valour, and scuttled the whole exercise. What occurred instead was *Realpolitik*. The ERA assessment panels themselves in the humanities, social sciences, and creative arts made judgements as to quality, with the help of peer assessors, without promulgating lists of journals or ranking them explicitly.

So the situation is ambiguous and confused, but if not liberated, then allowing some licence. This is handy also, because of the coming-and-going in Australian higher education policy of the “impact” of research: that is, the imperative to do, and fund, “relevant” research, useful for specified national goals or priorities (which in Australia exist, albeit with only some connection to humanities and social sciences research. Against this backdrop, the most obvious institutional challenge for us is the constant emphasis to publish in the “top journals” as a signifier of the quality of our work. Fortunately, after the abolition of the ill-fated ERA journal rankings just mentioned, there is now a clear sense that the field is best placed to judge what the top journals are. Or, as Graeme Turner puts it:

Researchers should recognise that this reconfirms an important principle: they should be publishing the best work they can in what they know to be the best possible locations. (Turner, 2011, p. 5)

It is a handy and supple formulation, but remains hotly contested, especially at the institutional level of universities.

For example, recently, in the great tradition of belatedness that characterizes my university, we were asked, at very short notice to provide a list of top journals and presses in our field. This was to provide a record for the university's use, especially for strategic recruitment. In the case of journals, we were asked to divide these into

A* and A. My reluctant response was to provide the list of media and communication journals from Thomson Reuters ISI/Web of Science — with some other journals added. In discussion with colleagues, it seems impossible, and very unwise, to nominate some journals as A*. I was not happy to solely provide the Web of Science list because I query how well its citation reports help us to understand the “journal’s true place in the scholarly research world,” as Thomson Reuters has suggested (<http://about.jcr.incites.thomsonreuters.com/>). For one thing, most of the journals in the list are published in English. Indeed, in its 2014 White Paper, Thomson Reuters explains that:

English is currently the global language of science ... The evident trend is that the journals most important to the international research community will publish full text in English. This is particularly true in the natural sciences. (Thomson Reuters, 2014: 12).

However, Thomson Reuters also notes:

There are exceptions to this rule in the Arts & Humanities and in Social Sciences. For example, English-language text is not a requirement in areas of Arts & Humanities scholarship in which a work’s national focus takes precedence — in studies of regional or national literature. Nonetheless, full-text English is highly desirable, especially if the journal intends to serve an international community of researchers (Thomson Reuters, 2014: 12).

There is not the space here to develop a full critique of this, but I find it hard to believe that there are no journals in languages other than English in our field, and in other fields of the humanities and social sciences, that would be regarded as leading journals. It is not just in literature that the national or regional coordinates of knowledge are influential — it is across many other areas of society, culture, politics, and so on. I find it disturbing that around the world, researchers are being required to only publish in these Thomson Reuters Web of Science core journals. It is sad that this is the privileged location for scholarship, being funnelled from countries whose researchers are neither well-represented on the editorships or boards of these journals, nor whose concerns and worldviews are well registered in their governing assumptions. It is especially curious, given this occurs at precisely the time when the metrics area is becoming highly contestable, whether from Google Scholar, or other forms of alt-metrics.

Leaving aside the obviously consequential issue of linguistic bias in the “cultures of ranking” (Redden & Low, 2012) or the much less rigorous ranking exercises that occur at different universities, there are many other evident problems. Nevertheless, it certainly makes good sense to use these as tools, or guidances. In universities, the urge-to-rank often seems bound up with the desire to send a crude signal or sharp shock to researchers to lift their game. Too often however there is a gulf between the research evaluation and strategy at central, senior executive levels of Australian universities, and the kinds of value judgements, ranking, and rating that occurs in disciplines. Ironically, this is a gap that the ARC has gone a fair bit to address in successive iterations of the ERA.

If journals with established reputations find it heavygoing to keeping their appeal, their rosters of authors, and maintaining cutting-edge research reputation in the current environment, there are particular challenges for open access journals. Open access journals come in a wide variety of platforms, business models and mandates. They are on the leading edge of the re-emerging area of freedom of ideas, and the common, public domain for our research. The open access movement has been fortified by the adoption of open access mandates by government research funding agencies, including the ARC. Across the media and communications field, there are many widely respected open access journals, such as the *International Journal of Communication*. In precisely this journal, Lagoze et al. offer an excellent theorization of why journals and, indeed, the infrastructure of scholarly journal publishing, has been slow to embrace open access (Lagoze et al., 2015). In reflecting on the open access movement, and the now substantial literature upon it, including their account, I wonder whether there has been sufficient examination of the regional contexts for scholarly publishing. I say this because open access, as Lagoze et al. (2015) acknowledge, is neither a holy grail nor a simple, inconvertible proposition. Open access is often a difficult proposition for scholarly journals for economic and infrastructural reasons.

In the Australian context, a number of journals have considered open access. It was a suggestion I made for *Media International Australia* when we celebrated its 150th issue (Goggin, 2014). To do so, however, would have required additional funds and labour. Labour is scarce in contemporary conditions of academic work and institutions; and funds are difficult to come by. Then there is the question of distribution and circulation: this too takes significant work, although is easier with digital technologies, and the aggregation of open access journals through Open Humanities Press. Perhaps it may have been a failure of will. Regardless, *Media International Australia* did not take that route and instead sought an agreement with Sage, one of the majors. From the perspective of some adherents to open access, this may seem heretical. But it is worth remembering that this journal, like many others, has lived on the smell of an oily rag for most of its existence, and had to prioritise affordability and content accessibility. So, it is very much part and parcel of the ideals of democratic access to knowledge and information, a long-standing project which open access has come to play a major part in — yet is not the only player by any stretch of the imagination.

Conclusion: Valuing Regional Scholarly Journals

Australia and New Zealand is collectively but one part of the world where significant scholarly journals have been created for international, as well as regional audience. But there is also evidence of somewhat similar experiences across the world — whether in other often compared settler societies to Australia and New Zealand, such as Canada and South Africa, emergent powers such as India and China, or regions such as Latin America or Europe. Such journals arise from specific communities, research traditions, and politics, and have their distinctive audiences, that may or may not map easily onto the social imaginaries of transnational global publishing (as suggested by Ahluwalia & Miller, 2005, in relation to what they dub journals of “tendency”). For their part, Australian journals do partake in a distinctive ecology of academic journal and book publishing. It is global and regional at the

same time, but has particular relationships and investments within our locale. This ecology needs to be fostered, safeguarded, and developed — and this should not be limited to just the “best” journals.

The biggest challenge is to take our distinctiveness in research and journal publishing to the next level, in genuine, equal international dialogue. This is especially important in the humanities and social sciences, where some work on media and communication simply cannot be published in the top ranking journals of the field. Or, when it can, the translations required — or imposed — in terms of how to talk about, frame, and justify Australia as a site for research, are too compromising. Why should some countries be regarded as the ex-nominated benchmark, that needs no explanation, and others, sometimes our own, remain the limited case.

In many ways, Australian researchers are comparatively well-off, because of the development of our universities, broader economy and society, and because, while we are a multicultural and multilingual country, we have the advantage of working in English. There is no doubt that we have the opportunity to ensure that we publish our research widely in the best possible locations internationally — and that we need to do so, given that we often hear that many of our researchers are not as well-known as they should be. However, we also need to put a priority on resourcing and strengthening our own journals. Engagement with the new economies of publishing and research, especially through open access, is an important, hopeful part of this, but is admittedly difficult to do so — especially when universities have mixed feelings about investing in journal publishing and editing. Our experiences and ideas can and should nourish a new vision from the global south, and from the matrix of regions that challenges the divisive and exclusionary intellectual landscapes we still inhabit. One way to contest the narrow band of international journal ranking is precisely to better understand, explore, support, and laterally connect the regions that support other journals, other intellectual cultures, and new research.

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