



# How the academy negatively affects writing practice\*

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Well before I had a serious position in the academy, I did a great deal of writing that was published. That meant that when I went on to become an academic I had far more experience, especially of publishing, than most of my peers. And I had also learned some of the ‘tricks of the trade’ – that is, the journalistic trade – which were far more helpful to me, even in my strictly scholarly writing, than one might have thought. I also had a decent sense of the variety of styles and rhetorical strategies that good magazine-style journalism teaches. I knew that writing to persuade people about a point of view (the sort of thing that one finds in opinion pages and op-eds) differs significantly from writing to convey an impression of a place or an event.

Perhaps most significant was the fact that I had plenty of experience of seeing my name and my words in print, which meant that I was relatively free from the anxiety about printed texts that haunted so many of my graduate-school peers and, later,

my academic colleagues. This was because, during a summer in the 1970s, I was writing three articles per week that were all published the following Monday afternoon. This was through a community newspaper, ambitiously entitled *The Common Press*, that had been set up by the staff of the local university student newspaper, in Peterborough, Ontario.

The pressures and the pleasures of writing multiple pieces per week and seeing them published so quickly was a great experience. In addition to producing my three articles per week, alongside my colleagues I was also required to help with the newspaper’s ‘production’ – which then, before computers, involved meticulously measuring spaces for headlines and using Letraset to construct them. All that hard work meant that all the writers, who were also the production people (in keeping with the ‘collective’ ethos of the times), had to stay up until the early hours once a week as it took all night to complete the painstaking task of measuring typeset copy

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and pasting the strips of paper on the blue-lined cardboard base that was then dispatched to the printers. But, like all workers, we were happy to finally 'put to bed' the weekly (as journalists say).

I don't think that the community newspaper was sold. I believe that our government grant included making it free to all residents – although distribution was the one task that was outsourced, so I was never sure how particular readers (who felt entitled to make irate phone calls to the office landline!) actually got hold of the product.

On that community paper, I was hired as the one, perhaps token, outside person. I likely got the job (such as it was, the pay was very low) because I had been very active in the student newspaper as an undergrad at Brock University in St Catherines, Ontario. I had come to the attention of the Peterborough group in part because someone there had liked my writing and because my father was a professor at Trent university, in Peterborough Ontario, home to a student newspaper, *The Arthur*, that provided the *The Common Press* with most of its summer staff. *The Common Press* owed its existence to a summer student employment grant – not unusual back in the 1960s and 1970s.

After I began my postgraduate studies in Toronto I continued to write for community newspapers. I wrote for *Broadside*, the Toronto

feminist newspaper/magazine, although I did not share the feminism of 'the collective', so I was always a bit of an outsider. I also wrote some things for *Fireweed*, which was a feminist arts magazine. But my main experience of both writing and politics was being on the collective of the gay liberation monthly, *The Body Politic*, a high-level magazine that could have been professionally run and financed but was not. Those were the days when it was not uncommon for people to subscribe to three or four periodicals (in hard copy) which meant there was a solid market for real journalism, unlike now. At *The Body Politic* I knew we had a good 'product', as the marketing people would say now. The production and design values, for one thing, were of professional calibre, unlike some of the feminist papers I had written for, which were little but pages of grey text. At the BP (as it was fondly called), I recall one day looking over the head of the gay male volunteer who was updating the subscriber list (which had at one point been seized by the police) and seeing Christopher Isherwood's name in black and white. That meant that a real writer was reading my magazine, which gave me a thrill.

It was that white gay guy, Rick Bebout, originally from Massachusetts, essentially editor in chief at *The Body Politic*,<sup>1</sup> who first embodied, for me, what a

1 He later died of AIDS complications, as many of my former comrades did.

good editor can do. I will forever be grateful to him for taking the time to explain what a 'lead' was and why it mattered. Of course, not every piece of writing needs one, but I now know that if I want an op-ed to be published in my local mainstream newspaper I have to have a good punchy lead. I am also posthumously grateful to Rick for commissioning pieces that appealed to my own political and cultural sensibilities but that he edited, really edited, not just copyedited. One time, I travelled to England for my doctoral research (to read things in the old British Museum), and he commissioned a piece on lesbian life in London, which I dutifully wrote after inquiring of some American lesbians who lived there if they knew of a good leisure venue. I recall that it was in London that I also heard Joan Armatrading for the first time – not in person, just her recorded voice. Eventually, I became co-editor of the cultural pages of *The Body Politic*, along with Alex Wilson.<sup>2</sup> In that role, I was able to commission book reviews and, in those pre-internet days, books and book reviews really mattered. I realised after a while that sending books to particular people to review was an amazing exercise of largely invisible power. And, back then, our magazine could and did review virtually every book that was published

on LGBTQ subjects, including biographies of famous people (Gertrude Stein, Oscar Wilde) and accounts of movements and struggles.

That experience of community journalism meant that when I began working on my PhD, at York University, in Social and Political Thought (a new programme at the time), I already had considerable experience of meeting deadlines and coming up with quick pieces on timely topics. But, more importantly, I also knew something about the craft of writing – unlike the vast majority of my cohort, who had never peeked out beyond the academy to consider their work as 'writing'. I also had a good sense of what socio-legal scholars now would call the materiality of journalism: those sleepless Monday nights spent measuring the width of Letraset fonts to make sure that 'good' headlines did fit the space stayed with me for years.

Since then, I have published more books than most academics. And I continue to love writing, so it's likely I will keep doing it as long as my brain and my fingers cooperate.

However, my experience in the academy has led me to the view that most academics are not born writers, and some really aren't suited to the task at all. In fact, some are pure researchers and

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2 Much later he also died of AIDS: the word 'trauma' was not in circulation then, but the astounding number of deaths amongst the gay men I worked with certainly had its effect.

need someone else to write up their findings in a way that will appeal to their target audience. Sadly, they usually don't team up with a writer but with another pure researcher, thus compounding the problem. Others can write, but only in the most wooden of prose styles – perhaps out of the desire, inculcated in their student days, to sound 'serious' and rigorous.

In my view, the key problem with academic writing in our own day is that there is a largely implicit but sometimes explicit discipline imposed by the formats deemed appropriate for most scholarly journals. For example, I am on the foreign editorial board for *Economy and Society* – certainly a good leading-edge interdisciplinary journal – but I often feel that when I get my complimentary copy in the mail I see articles that look as if they are translated from German or French into English. Even though they are not actually translations, they sound like Habermas at his worst.<sup>3</sup>

English is actually a great language for what one might call 'plain' writing. My late colleague, Ian Hacking, who had more influence on me than he ever knew, was a master of writing about technical or obscure subjects with a style that did not presuppose a PhD in philosophy

in the reader. His books are models of good English writing – perhaps because, unlike most of my largely Foucauldian friends, he was 'trained'<sup>4</sup> in English analytic philosophy, which values ordinary language to the point of obsession.

Since I have now come to the frankly programmatic part of this reflective piece, I should mention that the advice I usually give to PhD students who are struggling with style issues is to recommend that they concentrate on 'telling a good story'. This is one thing I learned from, or with, Rick at *The Body Politic* that is still with me today. Scholarly work finds a captive audience of people who feel they must read this or that, to keep up with 'the field'. But, in contrast, in journalism one needs to create a reader, or at least entice a reader who is a free agent and only reads out of choice. Nobody has to read your particular article even if they buy the newspaper or magazine. That is a lesson that PhD students especially would do well to learn. Your supervisor may be forced to read your work, but other readers need to be persuaded. You do that with a good lead that promises a good story. It's stories, narratives as they say, that move people and move the world. Charts, numbers and abstract concepts rarely move anyone. And inventing

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3 Although I have not read Habermas in German – it is possible that the translations do not do his style justice, as is certainly the case for Nietzsche.

4 A word I despise, although in this piece one might say I am writing about my 'training' in journalism.

novel classifications for the sake of 'getting published' in highly ranked journals, as so many scholars do, is simply a waste of good writing time.

But academics have had a professional 'deformation' (as the French say), so that many have lost their ability to tell stories, even though as children they no doubt told many and enjoyed hearing them. That is largely the result of academic career pressures pushing writers in the direction of 'top' ranked journals, which usually restrict what they publish to texts that look and sound like previous articles in the same publication.

Most scholarly journals expect a certain 'product' from their authors, and, of course, they usually get it – the race for publishing being what it is – and not only in the UK. That product – and the marketing term is apposite – is generally far too jargonistic and wordy and, ritually, starts with what is called 'a review of the literature'. But, if one is tackling a novel theme, then there is no literature, or else there are many possible literatures. Beginning by telling a good story would be the way to go, in my view, instead of writing something like: 'Here's what these folks have said and here's what these other folks have responded: but there is a gap in the research and I want to fill it.' As an old friend of mine,

Cynthia Wright, once said, 'that is a Polyfilla theory of research' – find a gap, fill it!<sup>5</sup>

Good writing does not seek to fill research gaps. After all, there are countless, perhaps infinite, research gaps, and surely they do not all need filling? Some issues and questions do not deserve to be studied. Further, good research does not seek to add yet another brick to a wall already teetering on the verge of collapse due to too many 'contributions'. Good writing tells good stories. And in the anglophone world, good writing is writing in an English that every literate person who reads books can understand.

The scholarly journal article, it seems to me, has become a disciplinary machine whose usefulness has never been subject to any review. There are many peculiarities of the scholarly publishing world that should never have been invented. For example, my former colleague Rosemary Gartner once said to me that in her work as one of the editors of a 'top' American journal, she was tired of seeing manuscripts that she described as 'LPUs' (the Least Publishable Unit). Chopping up a good research project into three or four parts, each destined for a different journal, is one of the negative consequences of the convergence of university ranking and payroll practices and the character of academic journals. One does

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5 Polyfilla is the commercial name for a product one can use to hide cracks and seal edges.

not hear of novelists trying to send ‘least publishable units’ to different markets; a novel, just like a scholarly research project, needs to retain its integrity, and readers expect that.

But the LPU phenomenon is just one of the problems that plague today’s scholarly publishing universe. There are many others, and I hope this series of articles about the ‘writing practice’ of various legal and socio-legal academics will help to identify them.

What is especially sad is that many interdisciplinary journals, perhaps suffering from existential anxiety in the largely discipline-bound world of modern universities, rigidly insist on articles that look like all the other articles they have already published. Often, authors get critical comments lamenting the absence of citations to whatever body of work is the referee’s favourite. Or else referees use the

anonymity of the review process to flog their own agenda and their own work – but that would come close to malpractice, so perhaps I’ll leave it there.

Finally, it may be useful for younger scholars now – many of whom seem to think I was born with an academic silver spoon in my mouth – to know that I have had numerous rejections from ‘good’ journals. For example: I recall many years ago sending a ‘theory’ article to *Theory, Culture and Society* and receiving comments including ‘the author really needs to cite and use Bourdieu’. I gave up. Of course, I knew Bourdieu but I did not want to mention his work on cultural capital, mostly out of a feminist desire not to genuflect before ‘great men’. Eventually, I published the piece in an obscure Canadian journal whose citations were likely not ‘indexed’ anywhere prestigious.

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So how could things be different? What would I do if I were in charge of a whole lot of journals, say all the Cambridge ones or the Sage ones or the ones living in Routledge’s capacious stables? I really don’t know. The problems I identify in this piece seem too overwhelming, and, unfortunately, they go to the ‘heart’ of today’s academy.

One thing that could be done is to limit the value – including the salary increase value – of articles published in scholarly journals. I

have found over the past 20 years or so that writing books is far more rewarding. However, I know that not everyone wants to write a book or has the inspiration as well as the (quite specific) book-writing skills to go with it. Perhaps one could try letting people – including tenured academics – experiment with different formats and genres and just see what happens. Not everyone is an artist; only a few people could, say, direct a film. And few of us scholars have the skills needed

to build a wonderful interactive website. But if institutions were to become less rigid in their incentive structure, so that refereed scholarly journal articles were not the 'gold' coin that they have become – if pluralism in genres and formats were to be admissible – then perhaps people in the academy might find that they could enjoy presenting their research.

Of course, today's academy suffers from contradictory incentive structures: on the one hand there's a worship of 'good' journals and the articles published in them, but, on the other hand, there are also rewards for those people who turn their backs on scholarship and pursue what is often called 'impact'. In Canada the federal research funding agency has been promoting what it calls 'partnerships', meaning that scholars with no particular experience of the social world, and usually innocent of any activist experience, are incentivized to 'partner' with organizations such as community groups, or even police departments. Traditional single-authored, carefully researched work – such as that still done by most historians – is still valued in certain institutions. However, the push to be 'relevant' and 'engage' with government and civil society groups is felt very strongly in more workaday, less elite institutions. I suppose that is one of the practical effects of the scholarly journal pyramid of prestige: it enables certain

institutions to call themselves 'research universities', while other institutions and their employees are consigned to economy class (or working-class, as my daughter once noted when we were about to board a plane).

In relation to the 'prestige versus relevance' dialectic, I think it's very important to not fall from the frying pan of the scholarly journal article disciplinary machine into the fire of 'relevance', especially 'policy relevance', often an albatross around the necks of scholars in fields such as law, social work, criminology and public health. But if those seeking 'relevance' feel encouraged to experiment with non-traditional formats – not just writing dreary policy reports for government bodies, a genre which in my experience has a worse disciplinary logic than the scholarly journal article – then perhaps something useful will come about.

In the end, about the only thing that should consistently characterise scholarly attitudes and priorities is the old Platonic notion of 'a sense of wonder'. Surprised at what we discover when we do research – and it's not worth publishing anything that only tells us what anyone would expect to find – we might then talk with one another about choices that are available to us in terms of formats and genres. In my experience, those conversations rarely take place, and certainly never in formal environments. I

hope there's at least agreement that the scholarly journal article is only one of the formats that could be used to present one's research and analysis. Surely, academic freedom should include freedom from the coercion of certain overvalued formats?

Form and format are as important as the content of what we teach/think, but we rarely think about format and genre

choice – much less discuss options with our colleagues and students, despite our much vaunted 'critical' faculties. I hope this short and rather self-indulgent reflection helps someone to think about style, genre and format – important dimensions of texts seeking publication that generally go 'without saying' in the academy.