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New MCR Editor Goals: Fairness and Theory

By David K. Demers, editor, *Mass Comm Review*

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The changing of editors at a scholarly journal usually brings uncertainty; sometimes angst.

How will the new editor ensure fairness when assigning manuscripts for review? What expectations does the editor have for manuscripts? What are the editor's biases and long-term goals for the publication?

As new editor of *Mass Comm Review*, my purpose here is to answer those questions.

Needless to say, fairness is not an option for a journal, it is a requirement. A lot of decisions — including tenure, promotion and merit pay — depend on getting published. Unfortunately, an editor can inadvertently kill a manuscript by sending it to a reviewer whose ontological, theoretical or epistemological approach differs radically from the author's. And this problem is compounded in the field of communication because we are so diverse.

Theoretically, our work draws from many other disciplines, including sociology, psychology, anthropology, philosophy, law, history and, some even say, our own distinct discipline. Methodologically, we employ qualitative and quantitative methods, ethnomethodology and survey research, ethnography and laboratory experiments, historical methods and legal analysis. Philosophically, we have materialists and idealists, relativists and absolutists, empiricists and rationalists, and many perspectives in-between.

In my opinion, this diversity is a source of strength rather than weakness. In times of paradigmatic stress, it enables our field to adapt more quickly. However, this diversity also means that the level of agreement in our field is diminished when it comes to questions of theory and research.

While I can't guarantee that a reviewer will always share the author's philosophy of science perspective, I have implemented steps to decrease the probability that a manuscript will be reviewed by someone with a different set of assumptions. First, I have assembled what I believe is one of the most diverse and prestigious editorial boards in our field. It includes humanists, positivists (logical to post), legal scholars, and historians. Second, I have asked board members to identify their theoretical, methodological, and philosophy of science approaches and biases. As manuscripts arrive, they will be matched with potential reviewers. Third, all manuscripts will be evaluated by no less than two reviewers and myself. Reviewers will have two months to return their critique. If the review process takes more than three months,

I will send a letter explaining the situation.

I also expect that manuscripts submitted to MCR will have a strong theoretical foundation. Works based on raw empiricism will have difficulty getting published (with the exception of descriptive studies or grounded theory). I'm not anti-empiricist — in fact, most of my published works are data-based. Data helps separate good from bad theory. However, data without theory is like a new professor without lecture notes — forever rambling.

My desire to increase emphasis on theory is stimulated partly by the research of Potter, Cooper and Dupagne (1993), who surveyed major mass communication journals and found that only 13 percent of the "social scientific" studies published are theory-driven — most are data-driven (inductive and quantitative). Like most media sociologists, I am opposed to the idea that reality and truth can be directly and accurately perceived by the senses, independent of any formal, deductive theoretical framework. Theory-neutral observation is impossible. Data are not self-explanatory. Reality is socially shaped. All observation makes certain ontological and epistemological assumptions. My bias, and I do have one, is post-positivist. I give stronger weight to theory but believe that empirical research is necessary for testing theory. I also agree with Alexander (1988) that social science will always be over-determined by theory and under-determined by data.

Aside from fairness and a strong theoretical approach, I am also instituting a new feature called "Scholarly Milestones," in which a well-known scholar (or team of scholars) in our field comments on his or her (its) research. My goal here is to give scholars and students in the field easy access to the latest ideas and thoughts of the top researchers in our field.

As always, I am open to ideas and suggestions from scholars and students in our field. And I hope this brief essay helped to reduce any angst or, at a minimum, some of the uncertainty associated with the changing of the editor.

Alexander, J. C. (1988). The new theoretical movement. In N. J. Smelser (ed.), *Handbook of sociology*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 77-101.

Potter, W. J., Cooper, R., & Dupagne, M. (1993). The three paradigms of mass media research in mainstream communication journals. *Communication Theory*, 3, 317-335.