



Publish and perish

Nick Butler

review of

Clark, T., M. Wright and D.J. Ketchen, Jr. (eds.) (2016) *How to get published in the best management journals*. Edward Elgar: Cheltenham and Northampton, Mass. (HB, pp. 320, £85, ISBN 9781784714673)

A few years ago, I published a paper on the ‘secrets of excellence’ in the business school (Butler and Spoelstra, 2012). It was written as an ironic guide to publishing in top-ranked management journals. Some of the tricks of the trade we identified – ‘productivity through people’, ‘close to the customer’, ‘bias for action’ – overlap with Peters and Waterman’s 1980s business-yuppie classic *In search of excellence*. Our point was to highlight that academic life has become so colonized by managerial imperatives that it should be understood through the empty language of corporate-speak. *How to get published in the best management journals* is what happens when these secrets of excellence are taken literally.

Let’s start with the title: *How to get published in the best management journals*. This taps into a pervasive academic myth: that the outlets we publish in have an intrinsic quality, independent from the research that appears within their pages. Of course, this myth does not hold up to scrutiny; journal rankings and citation indices are flawed proxies for scholarly merit. Yet we continue to act as if the journals at the top of the academic tree actually have some special totemic value in themselves. As we would expect, this myth is smeared liberally across the pages of this strange book.

How to get published in the best management journals is not meant for high-flying tenured academics who have already made their mark in the ‘best’ management journals. On the contrary, this book is aimed squarely at the most precarious members of faculty staff, those who have the most to lose by failing to publish in premier outlets – of whom doctoral candidates and early-career researchers are perhaps only the most visible. As the editors put it in their introduction, this book seeks to ‘demystify the journal publishing process’ [1], presumably for those who are utterly mystified by it.

This may seem like a noble objective. But when viewed in the cold light of day, this book is feeding on fear. Fear of not publishing, or not publishing in the ‘best’ journals. Fear of not getting a job, or losing a job. Fear of not getting promoted, or not getting promoted quickly enough. Those fretful masses, huddled together in university canteens, moving in packs at international conferences, demoralized by short-term teaching contracts and broken by hostile departments – this book is meant for you.

How to get published in the best management journals is edited by Timothy Clark, Mike Wright and David J. Ketchen.¹ The former two have served as General Editors of *Journal of Management Studies* while the latter has ‘served as an Associate Editor for seven scholarly journals and...an editorial board member for fourteen journals’ [xiii], although he neglects to say which. Numbers speak louder than words, apparently. In the opening chapter, the editors insist that, although we may not always like it, scholars must pay heed to journal rankings like the UK’s Chartered Association of Business Schools Academic Journal Guide (otherwise known as the ‘ABS list’) and strive to publish as much as possible in highly rated outlets. They spell it out for us: ‘career advancement, scholarly reputation and pay are intimately tied to being able to publish in journals’ [1] – especially the ‘right’ ones [2]. There is no mention of the deleterious effects of journal lists on academic quality-of-life; the editors seem to accept these ranking systems at face value, despite their well-known problems (e.g. Macdonald and Kam, 2007; Nkomo, 2009; Tourish and Willmott, 2015). For the editors, what is needed is more ‘actionable advice that authors can leverage’ [6] to get published rather than any reflection on the politics of knowledge production in the business school.

¹ Intriguingly, Wright previously had a hand in editing *How to get published in the best entrepreneurship journals* (Fayolle and Wright, 2015), which begs the question: how do entrepreneurship journals differ from management journals? Do they really warrant two separate volumes? We can only hope this doesn’t lead to further collections from Edward Elgar Publishing, like *How to get published in the best Australasian forensic accounting journals* or *How to get published in the best feminist credit risk journals*. But at £85 a pop, who can blame them for trying?

That's a shame, because this book is a depressing case study in how knowledge gets produced in management studies. Of the 32 chapters, a total of five are authored or co-authored by women. As if to reinforce this gender imbalance, Chapter 2 is comprised of a dialogue between the lead author of an article (Petra Andries) and the associate editor who dealt with her submission to a 4-star journal across five rounds of review (Mike Wright again). Here, a picture is painted of a kindly male patrician patiently steering a young and inexperienced woman through the hoops of the publication process with fairness and sensitivity. But there is no mention of all those unscrupulous editorial practices that serve artificially to inflate the journal impact factor. Heck, all we get from the associate editor is the revelation that 'I really like to work with others and help them move their paper forward' [20].

Gamely, Andries says she 'learned a lot from this process' [20] that spanned 31 months from initial submission to eventual acceptance. But what exactly did she learn? Perhaps how to play the game according to the rules, a recurring metaphor in the book. These rules are laid out by a number of authors, including Mike Wright (yet again), who offers advice on how to 'sustain a publications career' [49]. His language comes straight from the entrepreneurial playbook:

- '[I]dentify new opportunities and exploit them...efficiently' [49]
- Ensure 'product differentiation' [59]
- '[B]uild...social capital' [66]
- 'Develop a [h]eterogenous [p]ortfolio for [m]omentum' [56]
- Cultivate '[a] reputation for delivery' [66]
- '[D]evelop generalized non-tradeable assets' [61]

Elsewhere Danny Gioia, in his chapter 'Rules of the game', presents more homespun wisdom:

- 'Publish or perish!' [110]
- 'Two good publications per year keep the wolf away from the door' [110]
- 'More shots on goal means more goals' [110]
- 'Don't take no for an answer' [110]

- ‘Find a path with a heart’ [112]
- ‘Just do it!’ [112]

Other chapters are more concise and evocative. R. Duane Ireland’s contribution implores us simply to ‘[walk] in the snow’ and ‘[learn] the value of patience’ [114] – the kind of patience you will need, no doubt, for enduring five rounds of review over a period of 31 months. It’s cold out there.

These are distillations; in reality, the book is a ragtag collection of well-meaning recommendations, self-serving anecdotes, disingenuous morality plays, off-the-wall rants, recycled journal articles, and the occasional diamond in the rough. Almost a third of the book is concerned with various subfields of management (e.g. entrepreneurship, finance, economics, business history, human resource management, international business, strategic management, etc.). These interminable chapters provide authors with the leeway to engage in unfocused rambles and ridiculous self-citation – for example, 24 out of 35 references in Gerald P. Hodgkinson’s chapter are to his own work.

Then there are the bizarro contributions. One of the strangest chapters is ‘When being normal is not enough’ by Philip L. Roth and Wayne H. Stewart. Here, the authors mysteriously invoke Winnie the Pooh, Eeyore, Piglet, Owl and Roo to respond to a critique of their work from more than a decade ago – an affront that still smarts, evidently. I’m not sure if it is meant to be funny, but they appear to hold a genuine grudge against poor Miner and Raju, scholars who ‘discovered no errors in our analysis, but only added dubious data to the situation’ [145]. Ouch.

Also in the oddball category is David J. Ketchen’s passive-aggressive chapter, ‘Why I don’t want to co-author with you and what you can do about it’.² Like a pick-up artist negging his target, Ketchen states that his goal is ‘to offer some useful tips on how to be a more appealing potential co-author’ [125]. After throwing us a few morsels of advice – ‘don’t sandbag’ [126], ‘save the drama for your mama’ [127], and ‘keep your promises’ [128] – he recounts an anecdote about his doctoral advisor, who ‘turned an unrecognizable shade of red as he roared’ at the young Ketchen for not turning in his best work [126]. This encounter is presented as a valuable learning opportunity rather than an inappropriate act of verbal aggression. With mentors like that, who needs enemies?

² In case you missed it on his website, he reminds us that he has written ‘140 or so co-authored articles across the last three decades’ [125].

Negative emotion also rears its head in James G. Combs' chapter 'Respond to me – please!'. Framed as a letter from a reviewer to an author, Combs reminds us that he is 'a busy person' [153] with little patience for authors who 'waste [his] time' [155] with their inadequate response to his review. His tone is relentlessly pissy: 'Your action editor read my comments and those of the other reviewers and gave you an opportunity to have your successful outcome at *this* journal: congratulations for you, more work for me!' [153; emphasis in original]. He admits to being 'grumpy' [154], 'frustrated' [154], and in a 'sour mood' [155] when authors fail to live up to his expectations, while also acknowledging that he is 'too lazy' [154] to read their response letter properly. The chapter does provide some insight into the mind of a time-poor reviewer overwhelmed by shoddy submissions, and at least it's sincere – which is more than can be said about many other chapters. Incidentally, Combs gives us perhaps the best piece of advice in the entire book: 'Stop with "thank you for this insightful comment" at the beginning of each response. Let's be honest; some of my comments made you angry, and you're not fooling anyone with false praise' [156].

Ben R. Martin's chapter on 'Ethics and integrity in publishing' is the highlight of the entire collection, not least because it tackles topics that others seem reluctant to address: p-hacking, salami slicing, redundant publication, data trimming, HARKing, coercive citation, gift authorship, impact factor manipulation, and various other forms of corner-cutting and game-playing by authors, editors and reviewers. It's a veritable smorgasbord of questionable research practices, which serves to undercut some of the smugness and sanctimony found elsewhere in the book. Minimally, Martin's chapter suggests that there is a problem in contemporary academia with how we produce knowledge – a problem that *How to get published in the best management journals* only exacerbates.

It is hard to believe that anyone will read this edited collection from cover to cover. But maybe that's not what it's for. On the one hand, the book is a cynical cash-in by Edward Elgar Publishers to appeal to nervous early-career researchers at the bottom of the academic food chain (or ambitious arse-kissers on the up and up). On the other hand, it's another notch on the scholarly bedpost for the editors and contributors – and we know that Ketchen is keeping a running tally. But useful advice for scholars who are just starting their academic career in the business school? You'd be better off reading Michael Billig's *Learn to write badly: How to succeed in the social sciences* (2013), which offers both a critique of mass publication and a set of tools for thinking about academic writing beyond its 'market value'.

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