

## Reflections on the Art of Publishing

Lorna Stefanick



One of the most memorable moments of my academic career was organizing a panel on New Social Movements at the annual conference of the Canadian Political Science Association (CPSA) in Newfoundland. I was a newly minted PhD and I was just completing the first year of a two-year contract at the University of Lethbridge. The year before, I had taught a combined graduate/undergraduate course on new social movements at the request of the chair of Political Science at the University of Calgary. This forward-looking department head realized that the tide was shifting in our discipline, and that young scholars like me were challenging the boundaries of political science by writing dissertations in areas that traditionally were seen as "belonging" to other fields. And of course, where the newest scholars in a discipline are heading, there tends to be a herd of students following.

My challenge as a political scientist was to find appropriate texts to assign as required reading. At that time, social movement literature was the purview of sociology, and I worried that my political science students wouldn't find the readings relevant, particularly since my chosen texts were either from the US or from Europe. Then I had a brilliant idea! I'd find out who else in the Canadian political science community shared my interest in social movements, and publish a book composed of chapters I'd convince them to write. Boom! I'd create my own book for use in my classes.

And so it began, my first experience organizing a panel for the annual conference of the CPSA, an organization I had very limited experience with beyond presenting a couple papers as a PhD student. I approached a few big names in the field of interest groups theory and asked if they'd be interested in participating on a panel to discuss how this newfangled approach to understanding political interests related to the study of politics. One professor I approached had been a member of my



dissertation committee and had recently retired. After he said he'd participate, I was able to attract other panelists, thanks to his well-known name.

The session itself was very well attended (indeed, I don't think I ever had as many people show up to a session that I was involved with at CPSA!). I was delighted to see some established female political scientists in the audience who'd done work in this area, particularly given that there were so few women in the political science departments at U of C and U of L at the time (indeed, there had never been a woman in the U of L department before I was hired). I explained to the audience what I was hoping to do: have a round table discussion of some of the central issues facing those of us who were studying social movements from a political science perspective, and then use that conversation as a springboard to create an edited collection of essays from Canadian political scientists that could be used in the classroom. It was exhilarating! The participants were animated, the audience was enthusiastic, and great ideas were exchanged.

After the session, I went for coffee with a group of women who were particularly engaged by my idea for a book. The group included authors of articles on social movements that I had read and admired (could it get any better than this?!). We fleshed out some ideas and argued over different methodological approaches. At one point, one of the women asked me, "Which university do you work for again?" (translation: "Where the heck is Lethbridge?"). And then she asked, "What rank do you hold?" (translation: "Why have I never heard or seen your name before?") When I told her that I had finished my PhD the previous year and had just completed the first eight months of a two-year contract, the group fell silent. Eventually one of the women said, "You would be really stupid to undertake a project like this at this point in your career." What followed was a group huddle wherein these women took it upon themselves to provide some mentorship with respect to publishing – a first for me. In the end, they dispensed some of the best career advice I was ever given as a young academic starting out – all this from a group of women I had just met!

As a new academic, it is important to disseminate your work and to begin to build a CV which includes publications. But some publications count more than others. In political science, having co-authored peer-reviewed publications demonstrates that you are able to collaborate with other



scholars, but it is also important to have some single-authored publications in order to demonstrate that you are able to produce publishable work on your own. The best strategy is to mine your PhD dissertation for original work that you can turn into peer-reviewed academic articles. You are the expert on whatever you wrote your dissertation on, so why not share it with the world? Some dissertations can be turned into books; however, this is a long process and most junior scholars are anxious to get something out quickly to put on their CVs. So perhaps there is a single chapter within your dissertation that could be made into a stand-alone article? Or perhaps you could use some elements of the dissertation to build an article? My first publication was a paper that I wrote for a class during my PhD, which I rewrote after receiving feedback from the professor who graded it.

Seek advice from senior colleagues or others familiar with your field – ask them if they will read your article and provide comments. Your submitted article will be sent out for blind review if the editor of the journal feels it is a good fit – so why not get a jump on the process by dealing with the comments you will undoubtedly get from the reviewers? Addressing basic issues by having someone read your article before you actually submit it could prevent outright rejection by the editor/reviewer, or the difference between a response of "accept with revisions" (a commitment to publish the article if you make requested changes) and a response of "revise and resubmit" (which means it could still be rejected, even after you address reviewers' concerns).

What you should not do for your first publishing project, as I learned that memorable day at the CPSA conference in Newfoundland, is try to put together an edited collection of essays. I now realize that the group of women who talked me out of editing a book on new social movements did me a huge favour. First of all, editing a book is a massively time-consuming project and your CV can't wait that long if you are on the market for an academic job and don't have any publications. The tasks of choosing the framework for the book, soliciting contributions, reading contributions, and commenting on them can take years and an enormous amount of energy. Second, and perhaps most importantly, serving as an editor requires a skill set and a proven track record that you likely haven't acquired at such an early stage in your career. Specifically, you need to be able to make hard decisions and stick to them, which can be very difficult when you are just starting out.



An edited book project also requires the selection of appropriate people to contribute. The best strategy is to put out a call for papers as opposed to simply asking people to contribute. Forcing people to write out a formal proposal weeds out those who aren't really that committed to the project. And it also allows you to see from the beginning whether or not the proposed paper will be strong enough or sufficiently aligned to the framework of the book. It is at this point that the hard decisions begin: it can be very difficult to tell colleagues that you aren't going to accept their proposal. This difficulty is exacerbated if one of your prospective contributors is a good friend, someone who writes you reference letters, the chair of your department, or someone who might end up on a hiring committee for a job you've applied for. The difficulties don't end at the proposal stage. Later on in the process, if one of your contributors submits a chapter that doesn't align with your framework, or isn't up to a publishable standard, you need to be able to, first, recognize that you have a problem, and second, be able to tell the person directly what the problem is and what they must do to address it. You also need to be able to cajole tardy contributors who are holding up the production of the book. Both these tasks are onerous for anyone, but those who are just starting out (and in particular, those who are on the job market) may find it impossible to diplomatically tell senior colleagues that their work stinks, that it doesn't fit with the other contributions, or, that if they can't pick up the pace, they will be dropped.

Even if you are able to jump the hurdles and produce a good book years later, this type of project is still a poor choice for a junior scholar. While edited collections are typically peer-reviewed, they simply don't hold the cachet that peer-reviewed journal articles do for a hiring and promotions committees, or for grant and awards committees. Similarly, while writing a chapter in an edited collection is considered a publication, it is not viewed as equal to an article in a peer-reviewed journal. Simply put, the "bang" you get for the enormous amount of work that an edited collection requires does not equal the payoff you'd receive had you focused on establishing a record of publications in peer-reviewed journals. Suffice to say, I left that CPSA conference rather dejected after my group huddle with senior colleagues; I realized that while I had a great idea, I was not the right person to lead the project, given my precarious employment situation and my inexperience as a scholar. Ironically, one of the women in that group eventually produced the book on new social movements that I had been envisioning. Good for her: it was a good book and sorely needed.



So you want to publish something. Perhaps start with a paper you've written? Look in your own bibliography and pick out some journals that you've cited; they might be a good place to start in deciding where to submit. Journals are ranked by how often their articles are cited (the impact factor); you might want to pick a mid-ranked journal or smaller regional journal to begin with, as the competition to publish therein isn't quite as fierce as in a top-ranked national or international journal. Once you've chosen a suitable journal, see if there are any articles that have been published on your topic in previous years. The expectation is that you will have read these – they may be worth citing, either as support for what you are doing, or as a demonstration of how your approach to the research question is different and new. Pay careful attention to the journal's guidelines (for citation style, page length, illustrations, etc.); it's best not to annoy editors by being ignorant of their journals' requirements.

If you are fortunate and get a response of "accept with revisions" or even "revise and resubmit," resist the temptation to claim your article is perfect in its present form ("I mean, look how many hours I spent writing it! It must be just about perfect, right?"). Consider the suggestions for revisions carefully, and itemize your response to these revisions in your letter to the editor when you resubmit. I typically list the requested revisions in point form, and either state the reasons I am rejecting the suggestion, or state what I have done to address the reviewer's concern. The revisions and the letter should be done in a timely fashion. It is often difficult for editors to find reviewers willing to review articles. Nothing will annoy a reviewer (and thus the editor) more than having an author respond to his or her review eight months or a year down the road – by that time the reviewer will have completely forgotten what the article was about. An annoyed reviewer is more likely to take a dim view of the revised article – it is so easy to hit the "reject" button!

At the end of the day, publishing is like any other task we approach for the first time. It can be daunting; we wonder if we have what it takes to have our work published. But after the first publication, authors gain confidence and the whole process becomes less intimidating. It is important to recognize that it is your article that is being assessed, not you personally. At least, that's the way it is supposed to be! Perhaps better advice is that if you want to be a published academic, you need to develop a thick skin. The most brutal reviews I have ever received occurred when, as a



full professor, I submitted an article on a very contentious topic to a journal that I have published in many times over the years. These previous articles were on widely divergent topics, and I have always sailed through the review process. Because the two reviewers of this particular article made diametrically opposed assessments, the editor sent my article out to a third reviewer. The article was ultimately rejected – but not before I was called a bunch of unflattering names by the second reviewer, and was completely blown off by the third reviewer as having produced work that was so bad he wouldn't even bother commenting on it. Because I am a full professor with many publications under my belt, these reviews annoyed me as opposed to causing me to question my worth as an academic. I wrote out my rebuttal in equally forceful language, knowing full well I wouldn't send it to anyone. What I did do, however, was tease out the worthwhile criticism of the article (there is usually something worthwhile in even the most brutal reviews, although in this case it was from the first reviewer who recommended that the article be accepted). I will address the first reviewer's criticism when I rewrite the article—and then send it to a different journal. If you are going to write an article on a contentious subject, you can expect to be the subject of major criticism (sometimes vicious) – some reviewers simply can't entertain the ideas of someone who is taking the path less travelled. Many new scholars will by default take the path less travelled because they approach questions with fresh eyes. A measured response to "over the top" criticism is the difference between confident authors (who have published extensively) and those who internalize the critique, allowing self-doubt and the reviewer's negativity to hinder their research productivity.

Publishing is a lot of work and requires perseverance. But like other challenges in life, it can also be very rewarding. Seeing your work disseminated is the ultimate payoff for grinding out papers. While your first efforts may not be successful, considering peer review criticism and responding to it carefully should greatly improve your chance of success. Finally, you can't be successful if you don't at least try – so get out there and start submitting!

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*on those aspects of her career that give her the most pleasure: working with students and writing articles that are of interest to a general, as opposed to specialized, audience.*

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