

A Paper is like a Horse – and a Book is like a Whale?

Massimiano Bucchi

Published: May 8, 2019

Abstract

This essay responds to an invitation by the editors of *Sociologica* to write about publication strategy.

Massimiano Bucchi: University of Trento (Italy)

ORCID <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3005-9639>

✉ massimiano.bucchi@unitn.it; <https://mb.soc.unitn.it>

Massimiano Bucchi is Professor of Science and Technology in Society, University of Trento and has been visiting professor in Asia, Europe, North America and Oceania. He is the author of several books (published in more than twenty countries) and papers in journals such as *Nature* and *Science*. Among his books in English: *Science and the Media* (Routledge, 1998); *Science in Society* (Routledge, 2004); *Beyond Technocracy* (Springer, 2009); *Handbook of Public Communication of Science and Technology* (2014, with B. Trench, Routledge). He is the editor of the journal *Public Understanding of Science*.

My own experience as author is that there is no straightforward answer to the question of what are the best publishing formats for a scholar in the social sciences.

I started to publish at the end of my Ph.D., one theoretical paper and some empirical papers based on my doctoral research. My thesis was also published as a book by Routledge. Although at the time I did not fully realize this, I have since then learnt about the importance for a young scholar of publishing a book that captures the essence of your interests and research. It is, in my view, a question of defining your own identity as a scholar, who you are and what you have done so far. My second book was, on the other hand, commissioned directly by the publisher who wanted an introductory text to social studies of science. It proved much more difficult to try to explain clearly and carefully other scholars' work than presenting my own. I have thereafter edited other volumes, including a textbook in science communication and a 4 vols. anthology. My own experience with this kind of work is that it is highly rewarding in terms of international visibility, as well as in terms of the opportunity to learn from co-editors and contributors. However, it can actually be more time consuming and complex than writing your own book.

Since then, the decision about formats mostly came from answering the question: who do I want to talk to, and what kind of research results do I have? For example, in the early 2000s, natural scientists became interested in science in society and public perception of sciences, also in connection with heated debates about issues like biotechnology. It seemed natural, to me and to my colleagues, to try to engage in a discussion with them: so we targeted top science journals like *Nature* and *Science*, offering empirical results that we thought could help address some of the key questions and further stimulate the debate.

I also continued to write books, i.e. monographs. Quite simply, in my view a paper needs a clear, sharp focus: one central result and some specifications. A book allows to explore a topic more in depth, analyzing it from different angles. I suppose one could draw an analogy between short stories and novels for fiction writers. In his *Harvard Norton Lectures (Lezioni Americane, 1988)* Italian writer Italo Calvino wrote that a short story, or tale, is like a horse: it has to run, trotting or galloping, up to a point.

In my own experience, books are much more demanding to the author in terms of style (I suppose the obvious animal analogy, following Calvino's, would be the whale, particularly for American writers). It is not enough to have a good topic and interesting ideas to have a book: first you have to find your own voice, rather than echoing other people's voices; then you have to find a tone and rhythm for that specific topic. A book is not a collection of papers/chapters, but requires its own structure. If you wish the reader to follow a thread, this thread has first to be clear and exciting to yourself in the first place. Also, a book requires a different discipline in terms of writing. Papers can be written on and off, in between other commitments. Books require more intense dedication and continuity, otherwise the rhythm will be lost. Finally, papers can easily be written with another author, or even as a team. A book, on the other hand, is largely an individual, solitary exercise. I have often wondered how successful twin authors like brothers Goncourt, Ellery Queen and Fruttero & Lucentini could actually write together (apparently Fruttero & Lucentini used to split chapters to be later revised by the other author).

Perhaps because of these experiences, I became interested in the concept of style in science communication as an interesting bridge between individual experience and collective, normative standards — threads of this concept can be found in the work of great scientists like Galileo or Buffon and of scholars like Alistair Crombie or Ludvik Fleck.

I had an opportunity to reflect on my own experience as author when, in 2016, I have become editor of the international journal *Public Understanding of Science*, published by Sage. The journal currently receives approximately 250 submissions each year, with an acceptance rate of 14%. One of my first commitments, as editor, was to reduce response time, particularly for those papers who did not have many chances of successfully go through the review process. When we are not sure whether the paper fits the focus of the journal, we now ask a member of the editorial board to do a pre-review. If the response is negative, this at least allows authors to receive a quick feedback and decision and send the paper to another journal. One of the most positive surprises in editing a journal was to discover how much time and energy as scholars we are willing to invest into careful, anonymous peer reviewing.

Overall, the quality of the papers we receive is continuously increasing as well as the geographical coverage. When the journal *Public Understanding of Science* was founded in 1992, it published mostly papers by authors from English speaking countries. We now receive an increasing number of papers

from Asia, Africa, Latin America. Most of the submissions are based on solid, well organized empirical research. However, there is a tendency to address consolidated topics and established research lines. For some researchers, the choice seems to be low risk, i.e. getting the research they have done (or been funded for) published in a good journal. It would be important to receive more theoretical papers, or papers that reflect on the increasing body of research produced in our field to provide innovating insights and interpretations.

I am not sure I am in a position to give advice to young scholars, as the editors of this issue asked me. Based on my own experience as author and editor, I would be tempted to encourage them to look for the gaps in literature: do what (almost) nobody else is doing, rather than do what all the others are doing. Perhaps quite naively, I have often written the kind of paper or book that I would have liked to read as a reader.

But of course I realize that young researchers today are exposed to a variety of pressures to publish “safely” and quickly. I sometimes remind my students that Thomas Kuhn took some 15 years to complete *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) — a timescale that today would have probably got him into trouble with evaluation bodies.

Another simple advice it is not to take criticism as a sign of failure, but rather be grateful to colleagues who have invested their own time to read and criticize their work. And if they misunderstood, most likely it was your fault for not being enough clear.

In general, my modest experience is that good work always pays. Interesting and innovative ideas, even when rejected in the first place by a specific journal, will find another outlet; well-structured research, rich examples, can be further developed in a number of ways and contexts.

References

- Calvino, I. (1988). *Lezioni Americane. Sei Proposte per il Prossimo Millennio*. Milano: Garzanti.
- Kuhn, T. (1962). *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.