



Africa Media Review, Volume 14, Numbers 1& 2, 2006, pp. 61–71
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(ISSN 0258-4913)

Editing African Social Science: Some reflections and suggestions

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Abstract

The present essay examines the challenges and promises of academic publishing in Africa, and offers very useful tips for getting one's ideas in print. The role of the copy editor in this process is also examined.

Key terms: technology, academic publishing, rejection rates, copy editor, writing, refined thinking, CODESRIA Guide for authors

Résumé

L'essai traite des difficultés et des promesses de la publication de revue scientifique en Afrique et donne des indications fort utiles pour faire publier ses idées. Le rôle du rédacteur dans ce processus y est également abordé.

Mots clés : technologie, publication de revue scientifique, taux de rejet, rédacteur, rédaction, relecture, recommandations des auteurs du CODESRIA.

Introduction: Technology solves basically nothing

Great store is set nowadays on the latest technology. It seems much of the time that if only we had the newest and best, from desktop computers to computerised motor vehicles, life would be better, richer, happier. It is of course mostly a lie, generated in large part by the consumerist juggernaut that has enveloped practically all of us. One can appreciate this fact intellectually, but still fail to reject the lie. Most of us do just that. The present writer is no exception. Currently my life revolves around my new computer, my new high-speed always-on Internet connection, and my son's obsessive concerns with obtaining the latest branded goods for himself and also for his parents. He is ashamed that we do not drive a

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Mercedes Kompressor or the like, go on frequent holidays to 'the Continent' or Mauritius, equip our house with plasma TVs, and buy him the iPods, X-Boxes and Nikes that his friends seem to get as a matter of course.

I exaggerate, naturally. Especially as concerns my son. He is basically interested in doing well in Anglo sports such as rugby and cricket, and in other physical achievements for which technology is little help. He craves the adulation of the crowds as he hits a four or scores a try, just as an American kid wishes to belt a home run or make a touchdown. He seeks that adrenaline rush that only public personal achievement can bring. And the account of my own pre-occupations is likewise distorted. My new computer keeps on crashing and my Internet connection has been down for the last ten days. The technology has in some ways created more problems than it has solved. It is also unable to solve, in principle, my really pressing concerns, like how to write this article. Hence the hyperbole: technology solves basically nothing. Perhaps I should add: for a solvent, not yet unhealthy, socially un-marginalised individual. It might be otherwise if I was penniless and desperately ill.

It might seem that academic life has been transformed for the better in the last couple of decades by technology, and in some ways it has. Here the computer is central, for me at least, and not as a metaphor either. My work is computer-based. It is sent to me by e-mail, the work itself is processed on a highly complex programme (usually WordPerfect), and the result is stored and re-transmitted by this most iconic of modern artefacts. I can no longer compose anything in longhand, and have almost lost the skill of handwriting (legibly at least). Many of us cannot in fact ignore this technology or live without it. But the technology cannot write an article or edit one, except for the most mechanical tasks like Spell-Checker. I don't really need Spell-Checker in my life because I can in fact spell. Of course it has its uses. The technology certainly has not made me a better, happier person. It has solved nothing, basically. Nothing brings home this fact like that most important of academic routines: writing. And as someone who spends most of his working hours at present in correcting other people's writing, technology has displaced the personal, human element in only the most peripheral of ways.

The academic editor

The foregoing remarks are fully applicable to that rather invisible, little regarded and very forgettable figure, the academic (copy) editor. Nothing much has changed in the basic functions of the person who handles academic manuscripts for possible publication. The skills (if they can be

so dignified) are really not technology-based, although the technology may facilitate their execution. Nor has technology resolved the social context to the greater satisfaction of all parties. Academic editing tends to be a thankless task. Academics take the existence of journals for granted. Their interaction with copy-editors – and editors in general – assumes the form more of complaints than gratitude. An editor soon learns this fact of life, and may become somewhat cynical about his colleagues in the grand intellectual endeavour of social science. Cynicism of course is a corrosive attitude and only a pale substitute for editorial wisdom. I will try to avoid allowing it to leak over into these scattered reflections.

Editing in Africa gives rise to some conflicting feelings. The first one is in a sense political. The power dynamics in publishing about Africa - as in so many other areas - are heavily biased against the indigenous worker. The leading journals in the field, the most authoritative voices, are for the most part located outside of the continent. Much of the best local scholarship itself goes overseas, to appear in the pages of *African Affairs*, *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, *The Journal of Southern African Studies* and so on. It is hard to avoid feelings of resentment about the fact that First World academics are making their careers on the back of our continent, as are publishing firms in London, Oxford and New York. But of course these feelings are usually counter-productive. We cannot kick against the pricks, but must harden ourselves to tackle the problem head-on. That problem can only be met in the long run by a positive African response.

There are a number of factors that work in favour of local publishing. The first is cost: it is possible to make available journals edited and printed in Africa at a fraction of the ridiculous prices that the increasingly commercialised academic journals in Europe and the US demand. The second is proximity. We are here, and in principle we know best. The issue is to harness this local knowledge, infuse confidence in the rising generation of African scholars, and produce work that can equal any published on the outside.

The third factor is that African scholars are increasingly a self-conscious community, who can lend each other the support and organisation that must underpin individual effort. In this respect the achievements of CODESRIA constitute a beacon to others. One example is the role that the Council played in establishing the *African Sociological Review*, a successful venture in cross-border collaboration.

Of course publishing one's academic work locally may occasion feelings of isolation and futility. So what if we publish something of which we are proud in a local journal? Is it not destined to languish unread and un-

known? There is of course some substance to this worry. The answer is that the proper marketing and distribution of African intellectual production are tasks that can no longer be shirked. We need much better continental lists of African social scientists. And Internet and on-line publishing – as a means to an end, and not an end in itself – should enjoy a concerted effort by African academics and editors, a programme now actively pursued by CODESRIA.

A final point I would like to make here concerns the fate of most manuscripts submitted to local journals. I do not know what the situation is with other journals, but my own experience and that of my fellow editors has been that the bulk of submissions are not up to the standard that one expects for a peer-reviewed publication. Rejection rates are high, and it all seems a waste of talent and effort. The issue is one to which reference will be made again later on.

The process of editing

Editing is parasitical upon writing. But the editor as parasite is not guaranteed an easy life. In principle, the whole process is fairly straightforward. Manuscripts come in, either commissioned or unsolicited, and are scanned. At this stage many will be rejected and no further processing will take place. This may seem a gratuitous responsibility that an editor takes on, but it is no use wasting the time of referees with articles that you know are going to be rejected, or which you consider unsalvageable. Referees on whom you can rely are not in plentiful supply, and they tend to be busy people. They are doing you a favour by sending in a report on an article sent them. An editor who is not entrusted with this capacity to reject at the first stage is also not going to be easy to find. I know some academics think that this is an unfair practice, but in our circumstances it is unavoidable in my opinion.

Matters become more complicated after the first scan. An article that seems possibly publishable, with however many private qualifications on the part of an editor, must go to referees. Referees are unpredictable and differ in their approach. Some will provide helpful, constructive comments for the author. If they do, the article must go back to the author for revisions. Many referees are too busy to do so. If the referees are positive, then the article is ready for copy-editing.

The travails of copy-editing

Copy-editing can be easy or onerous. Most articles are publishable only after a copy-editor has gone through them picking up all (well, hopefully

all!) the flaws – of language, logic, fact, structure and referencing. There are not many articles that come in without some mistakes – even the best of authors will slip up now and again. At its most burdensome, copy-editing requires a painstaking check of each sentence and frequent corrections. At times, this editing will amount to re-writing what was in the original manuscript. This is a delicate matter, but cannot be glossed over. Authors frequently present original and interesting material, but their prose and overall presentation may be verbose, ungrammatical and unstructured. Such work could of course be referred back to the author, but experience suggests that short of an intensive one-on-one tutorial the presentation is not going to improve. The copy editor must step in and rescue it. The amount of salvage work required may vary tremendously, sometimes verging on very intrusive re-writing. Whether this accords with academic ethics or not, I am never quite sure. But it may be so obviously required that a copy-editor cannot duck the obligation. The question that poses itself is: is there a sound kernel here that with editorial assistance could be made to emerge? If so, then intervention seems a plain duty. Perhaps the only problem I have with this activity is that authors rarely object, but they even more rarely thank you for polishing their raw thoughts.

Trivial pursuit: Cleaning up the small matters

Copy-editors soon become aware of the standard shortcomings of the manuscripts coming their way. They learn to look out for them and to correct them without a sigh. Of course many of the most trivial issues could be avoided if authors took the trouble to study the style-guides that most publications offer would-be contributors. For example, Sulaiman Adebowale and his colleagues over the years in Dakar have put together an excellent pamphlet, *CODESRIA: Guide for Authors*, readily available for reading or downloading on the Council's web-site. The trouble is that most contributors seem not to read it, or do so only cursorily, much like students who hardly glance at the detailed and creative course outlines that conscientious university lecturers compile. As a result, the copy-editor encounters the same old errors time and again. Here are some of the most common:

- Inconsistent text layout, including headings, lists and paragraphing. One example of this problem is the highly irritating use of numbering of sections, sub-sections and so on. How often the author loses count and an article purporting to comprise of six sections contains only five - or vice versa! As the *CODESRIA Guide* plaintively requests, 'Please keep text layout simple'.

- The use of full justification of copy, instead of simple left justification, despite the express remark on this issue in the CODESRIA Guide. The latter may look untidy but it makes for a much cleaner text for the copy-editor and printer. Do not format with JUST-FULL because it looks better to you.
- The excessive use of bullets and other MSWord gadgets. When authors go to town on bullets, the result is a presentation that looks – and reads – like a laundry list. Bulleting is often a sign of lazy writers who cannot be bothered to put together a coherent narrative. If you must do the list thing, like I am doing here, simply start each point with a dash. Try also to make something substantial of the point, not a mere naming of an issue.
- Lackadaisical or excessive automatic footnoting. Now that word processors allow authors simply to slot in footnotes by pressing their mouse, some articles (historians and legal people please note!) consist of a forest of numbers and notes. The copy-editor must change these numbers and footnotes, sometimes running to a hundred or more, into plain text. It is a time consuming task. The worst however is the case where the author fails to run the automatic footnote facility correctly, and the numbering system goes awry. The correction of chaotic footnotes is one of the copy-editor's biggest nightmares, and an all too frequent one. How can writers be so oblivious of such an egregious error? Obviously, they do not read their completed product with any care, or otherwise they would note, to take an actual recent example of my own, that fn. #94 is empty of content.
- The mistaken impression that tables and diagrams – the more the merrier - enhance the writing. Nothing could be more mistaken. Tables present a headache to copy-editors and printers alike, and anyway readers often just skip them. Use these techniques only when really necessary, and *do not* produce full-colour figures. Full colour printing is too expensive and rarely within the budget of the academic publisher. Include them if you wish but they will just get deleted without a qualm by the copy-editor.
- The use of US-English: CODESRIA's very explicit policy is to standardise in UK-English. I have no quarrel with that. But many if not most academics today use US-English, if only because it is the default setting in MSWord. One might argue that we in Africa could decide to allow either version of English. But since the policy is UK-English, it requires only a little effort to change the language setting on MSWord (Tools-Language-Set Language). Another facet of this issue is the inconsistent use of either dialect: authors liberally help themselves to both versions of the spelling of, say, *organisation* – and the result is unpleasing to the eye and irritating to the mind.

- In an age when MSWord has automated so many writing tasks, it is surprising how many spelling errors some articles contain. Please run Spell-Check (in UK-English) and correct mistakes. The presence of one or two spelling errors in a piece is the norm, but when every page contains two or three one has to wonder how conscientiously the writer has gone about the work.
- Finally, there is a standard way of formatting references in the list at the end of an article. CODESRIA's own format is very simple and logical. Very few authors however bother even to master this basic procedure. One comes to expect that, but much worse is the unsystematic and incomplete referencing that many authors allow themselves - in any format. Sloppy referencing is often an indication of more serious deficiencies at the level of intellectual endeavour.

The preceding list is far from complete. It merely indicates the common problems facing probably all academic copy-editors. But when an article is rife with these kinds of shortcomings, there will be an inclination to consider whether the actual content is not also the product of a careless and poorly prepared writer.

Here I would like to digress to speak about a practice that the *South African Sociological Review* followed, and which the *African Sociological Review* has continued. In order to save money, material for the printer is not only copy-edited for language and so on, but also to lessen the work the printer must put into loading an article into their publishing programme. Printers do not use the standard word-processing programmes such as MSWord or WordPerfect, but have to download copy into a programme such as Ventura or Adobe Pagemaker. Such programmes work more quickly without the numerous formatting and other commands that word-processing puts into copy. These commands must usually be stripped out by the printer's setter – which costs money. Journal publishing can be made considerably cheaper if the editor and associates present copy that has been stripped out with the minimal amount of commands retained. This is a time-consuming exercise. Nothing taxes an editor's patience as much as authors who likes to use all the high-tech resources of the programme at their disposal and makes the article look like a pretty picture. This problem is particularly acute with MSWord, and it is one of the minor tragedies of our time that this software has become dominant in the market. For an editor, the programme of choice is WordPerfect with its crystal clear editing facility that enables one to see all the commands smuggled into the text as one writes. They can then be deleted and the printer handed a relatively stripped down version almost ready for the machine.

The process of writing

Writing a coherent piece of work is one of the most demanding of human tasks. For most people, including myself, it is arduous and nerve-wracking. Writing, as the American author Stephen King put it, is *refined thinking*. The emphasis here is on refinement. One must take the untreated ore of one's mental processes, smelt it and hammer it into a shape that is acceptable and pleasing to others. The whole process is fraught with uncertainty. You can never be sure that what you think is rather good will elicit the same response from others. Often it will not be, and one of the most useful lessons one can ever learn is to receive incisive - but hopefully constructive - criticism on what you have written. It once happened to me, and although the criticism was more destructive than constructive, it taught me something that I never forgot: *never think that writing comes easily*. There are exceptional people of course for whom the words simply flow and the result is sheer genius. Shakespeare was apparently one such writer, according to those who worked with him. But for most of us the struggle begins as soon as we are faced with the blank page. Those who say otherwise are often, in my experience, very weak writers indeed.

For the majority of African scholars the situation is complicated by the fact that they are writing in a second or third language. This fact is reflected in the standard of English in manuscripts that come one's way. By and large the problem shows itself in minor grammatical mistakes and the wrong choice of vocabulary. These matters are easily fixed at the copy-editing stage. Nevertheless, as English ripples out ever wider and inexorably across the globe as the international lingua franca and the language of science in particular, English second language writers have perforce to come to terms with it. (I shall not speak about French second language writers, as my French is not good enough to assess the linguistic standard of French manuscripts, although it is obviously a key issue for us here in Africa.) There is much to be said for scientific work in vernaculars. But scientists today, social scientists included, must also produce in international communications. The Dutch, for example, have long learned to do this. There is a flourishing social scientific literature in Dutch, but just about all Dutch scholars will also sooner or later find themselves writing in English. There are no easy answers to acquiring the necessary competence in writing academic English. Read a lot, write as much as you can, and look for people who can give you sympathetic comment on what you have produced. As the Italians say, one learns by making mistakes.

It is a commonplace that the core functions of an academic are teaching and research. The latter implies a command of writing skills. It is

indeed ironic that at the very heart of our jobs very little thorough training is provided, either as to how to teach or how to write. Perhaps the situation is improving nowadays at universities, although nothing much has changed in my own country, apart from perfunctory gestures at inducting new lecturers. But of course like any skill, teaching and writing can be improved by training. Lacking formal programmes in writing skills, most academics have to teach themselves. It is of concern that many do not appear even to make the attempt.

In a communication like this one, it would be an impertinence to attempt a tutorial on how to write. But in the spirit of sharing and receiving advice, let me list some obvious points that many academics could do well to follow, particularly if they are struggling to get published.

Preparing to write

- *Make sure that you have mastered your subject*, and in particular that you are not re-inventing the wheel. Have you explored the major literature in the field? If there are classics on the topic on which you are writing, you will receive a very sceptical reception if you do not at least show a passing acquaintance with them. With regard to African society, and depending on your topic, it looks very bad if you seem blithely unaware of the work of the early indigenous pioneers such as J. H. Soga, H. and O. Johnson, J. B. Danquah and Jomo Kenyatta, to mention a few, or of the best of colonial anthropologists like Isaac Schapera, E.E. Evans-Pritchard or Meyer Fortes. These were people in an unparalleled position to sketch the parameters of many topics relevant to contemporary Africa, no matter the reservations that later writers may have justly developed about them.
- Try to ensure that you are *up-to-date in the subject of concern*. For many of us in Africa this demand is often insuperable. Libraries are poorly stocked and the Internet has just gone down or refuses you access to journals on commercial grounds (your university cannot afford the outrageous subscriptions). Nevertheless, try your best and at least consult the Table of Contents of the major relevant journals of ‘Euro-America’, as well as African sources.
- *Prepare but do not over-prepare*. At some point all of us must stop reading and start writing. There comes a point of diminishing returns with every reference consulted. Too much reading can be as hazardous as too little. Always try to keep the main ideas you wish to develop at the forefront of your mind and not let them be drowned by information overload. This remark may seem to contradict the previous ones, but one must acquire the judgment as to

when one is ready to write, and still not be embarrassed by ignorance of relevant work.

Doing the writing

Writing is a deeply mysterious activity, based on processes occurring in some of many rooms in our brain which are not accessible to the conscious mind. We speak, we write, but the very activities are going on below the horizon, as it were. Brain science will no doubt soon demystify the nature of these processes somewhat, but it is unlikely that it will enable us to jump the barrier between our conscious cerebrations and the underground computations that make them possible. What is possible, however, is to view the product of this activity of writing, and to make decisions about how to improve what has bubbled up from below. Here are some suggestions.

- *Start writing.* For many people, the present writer included, the hardest task of all is to sit down and to start to write. There are many creative ways of starting to write (and even more of not starting), but what works for one may not work for another. Just do it, or as E. M. Forster once exclaimed (in print): ‘Only begin!’ Once a page or two has appeared, the task usually becomes much easier.
- *Avoid second-hand thinking.* Originality is a rare thing, but we all have our own ideas and our own voices, if we dig deep enough. Express them, as best you can, and do not slavishly follow fads and trends current in your academic milieu. Use them if you wish, but adapt them to what you have to say. And cut out the academic clichés that go along with so many intellectual fashions. Let your thoughts drive the words, rather than vice versa.

Shorten your sentences. Most academics, and I include senior academics and also myself, are guilty of dragging out our sentences, and overloading them with material because we are afraid to leave anything out, and want to squeeze in as much as we can at the same time. (This last sentence is an example.) Many sentences can simply be cut in half, as could mine here. We are no longer in the era of long, eloquent sentences.

Learn how to write a proper paragraph. Paragraphs are the basic building blocks of most prose. One rule, which is a bit mechanical but works well, is to express only one main point per paragraph, with the rest of the sentences acting as elaboration, substantiation and so on. Stephen King puts this point well in his book *On Writing*, which I re-read before

starting to write these remarks. He calls the main point the ‘topic sentence’, and it usually comes first.

Edit your writing and cut out superfluous words and repetitive thoughts. A competent and industrious copy-editor can often shorten a piece of writing by a quarter by adopting this rule. Try it yourself.

Finally, use the Spell-check and Grammar-check on your word-processing programme, if only to spare the copy-editor from frowning continually. And keep a good dictionary close to hand.

Conclusion

Perhaps the most important rule of all for the younger academic is to *practise* writing. One way of doing this while also getting your work in print is to write book reviews. It is surprising how few academics bother to write reviews. If you can write a decent book review, you can write a decent article, with practice. I think all of us in the game of academic publishing could do a lot more to bring on younger scholars by insisting that they publish book reviews if they are not ready to write up research or theory. The basic skills are very similar. In this spirit, Fred Hendricks and his colleagues on the *African Sociological Review* have also attempted to enlarge the scope for publication by introducing sections in the journal such as *Research Reports* and *Debates*. These sections are in part intended to encourage younger social scientists to produce work that while not really of article standard is yet a real contribution.

It is really not hard to get one’s work published, provided that the writer persists with the task and thinks about how to write. The writing is the hard part, not the publishing. That returns me to my earlier point about the high rejection rates that journals experience, including the African Sociological Review. No editor enjoys rejecting submissions, no more than most lecturers enjoy failing students. Many submissions to journals such as the Review are rejected although they contain something that is of interest to the readers. The reason often is that the writer has not got it right in terms of formulation and logic, and then the whole piece goes awry. We in Africa need to remember that we are very often the experts on topics that few outsiders will examine. If we write what we know in a way that meets the basic criteria of intellectual intercourse, if we consciously strive to *deepen* our arguments in lucid language, if we remember that copy-editors are ruthless and uncaring people, then current rejection rates will plummet.