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The Black Box of Journal Editorship Still Needs Opening: Opening the Black Box of Editorship

YEHUNDA BARUCH, ALISON KONRAD, HERMAN AGUINIS, AND WILLIAM STARBUCK. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. 296 pp. £55.00 (hbk). ISBN 9780230013605

In popular parlance, a 'black box' is a device that records cockpit voice communications. Opening a black box—most often done after an airline accident—is a process that reveals the *verbal interactions* between those responsible for a vessel's wellbeing. Opening the black box is an effort to understand the decision processes that govern the death (or perhaps miraculous survival) of those formerly aboard. Like airline captains and first officers, journal editors and associate editors are important people. While it is a stretch to claim they make life and death decisions daily, there is no doubt that over time, and perhaps collectively, they make decisions that do bear on the death or otherwise of academic careers. Of course, academic authors, unlike passengers, are co-producers of such outcomes and as such the analogy appears to hit the ground on that point. However, the 'black box' is the analogy that the editors of this collection use and it neatly highlights both the collection's intriguing features and its key weaknesses. Before I deal with these, a quick description of the text is in order.

This is a collection of 25 short chapters penned by what, in the UK context, might be known as the 'great and the good'. They are a collection of editors and former editors of some very well-known ('the great?') and not so well-known ('the good?') management, organization studies and psychology journals. The chapters are arranged into four parts that, respectively, provide a range of perspectives on editing (Part 1), explore the practices of effective editorship (Part 2), discuss the editing of specialist journals (Part 3) and investigate the relationship between journal editing and the academic career (Part 4). The book is published by Palgrave Macmillan and is companion volume to another, also edited by Yehuda Baruch, on journal article reviewing (Baruch et al., 2006; see also review by Devi Akella, 2007). The book is neatly produced, includes a functional preface rather than an introduction, places references at the end of each chapter (always useful for quick searches), and has usable but not elaborate subject and author indexes (very useful for academics who tend to read books backwards from the references to the text). However, the question for us is whether, given the bold claim made in the title, the book actually opens the black box of journal editorship?

Certainly some chapters are first-rate and include passages that might share much with revelations from the 'cockpit'. Some passages are emotionally uplifting, politically evocative and empirically and theoretically intriguing. Top of my list on this score is the 'Final Thoughts' section of the chapter by former *Academy of Management Journal* Editor Sara Rynes (Chapter 6). In this section, Rynes reveals that some of the field's most published authors are actually freeloading

scoundrels (no names, of course). She says that their long publication lists have in part been achieved 'because they do not provide the same services as reviewers as they routinely expect others to provide to them' (p. 65). And there's more! Rynes also reveals there are academic rascals who routinely resubmit papers to journals that have been previously rejected them, and further she rounds on a group of rogues who routinely appeal rejection decisions. Rynes also notes that these editorial pests appear to pass such habits to their students. Having sketched in the academic lowlife, Rynes balances this by revealing her heroes. These are authors and reviewers who she says have inspired her with their generosity and forbearance. Colleagues who go above and beyond the call of duty as reviewers, and who are humble, thankful and can find some green shoots in the midst of a devastating rejection.

One or two of the other chapters provide similar black box-type snippets. Angelo DeNisi (former *Academy of Management Journal* Editor) tells how one author successfully challenged the assessment of three reviewers who all recommended rejection of a paper, leading eventually to the paper's publication (Chapter 8). Hari Tsoukas, meanwhile, offers an uplifting tale of how he successfully published a paper by a Chinese scholar that was, initially at least, an uncomfortable fit with *Organization Studies* (Chapter 17). Tsoukas' story is illustrated with passages from the reviews of the paper and could, in my view, be usefully turned into a tutorial for *all journal editors* dealing with unconventional scholarship from non-English speakers.

Two other chapters also come close to 'opening the black box'. Arthur Bedeian's brave, provocative and anecdotally rich account of his ultimately successful tussles with editors and reviewers who try to 'rewrite' papers as *they* see fit is also straight out of the cockpit (Chapter 14). And the final chapter, for different reasons, also prises open part of the black box in my view. While seemingly authored by the text's four co-editors, this final chapter ('Epilogue: Trade-Offs among Editorial Goals in Complex Publishing Environments') is strongly laced with Bill Starbuck's previously published arguments about the weaknesses of journal impact indicators, statistical significance testing and reviewer evaluations (Chapter 25). It does not contain the stories that make Bedeian's chapter riveting, but the empirical and analytical control it exercises when dealing with the same issues makes it a worthy 'black box' chapter.

So what about the other chapters? Do they open the black box? Sadly, I think not.

Before 9/11 it was sometimes possible to visit the cockpit of airliners in flight—particularly if one had an eager child in tow. Away from the intensity of take-offs and landings, bad weather and delays, and with the sun streaming through 180 degrees of glass, a captain and first officer could offer an interested passenger a relaxed and affirming account of their work. Such accounts necessarily gave positive strokes to the aircraft, the airline, and in the process gave the traveller some 'you're in safe hands' reassurance. A visit to the flight deck is, however, quite different from listening to a black box recording. And aside from the chapters just mentioned, most of the other chapters in this collection are, sadly in my view, the editorial equivalent of a short visit to the cockpit on a sunny day.

Of course, each author produces such narratives differently. In the first chapter, Alison Konrad (former Editor of *Group and Organization Management*) is intent

on theorizing editorship as a ‘knowledge conversion process’. John Hollenbeck (*Personnel Psychology*) sees editorial work as various modes of consensus-building (Chapter 2). Ann-Marie Ryan conceives of her editor work as various forms of service engagement (Chapter 3), and Steve Barley presents the editor as an actor playing three different roles: an ambassador, a mentor and a manager (Chapter 4).

In the second section, where authors turn more to the actual ‘controls’ at their disposal, the captains’ tales become more descriptive and prescriptive. They include stories of how to introduce computer-based manuscript management systems (Chapters 5 and 10), how to organize editorial boards (Chapter 7), how to respond to journals ranking systems (Chapter 11), and what to look for in a paper (Chapter 12). For the most part there is something to learn from each of these chapters. For example, Debra Shapiro and Jean Bartunek’s discussion of ‘competence, benevolence and integrity’ as themes for editorial board selection (Chapter 7) is potentially useful, particularly as a counterpoint to Bedeian’s recent empirical challenge to the composition of editorial boards (Bedeian et al., 2009). Likewise, Don Bergh’s two-by-two system for identifying a paper’s contribution could, if applied carefully, help to organize our reviewing of papers.

In Section Three, the captain’s tales turn to a set of even more specific problems: how to manage a journal with very large submission rates (Chapter 15), how to edit a journal aiming at both practitioner and academic audiences (Chapter 16) and how to create a ‘global journal’ (Chapter 17). This latter chapter by Hari Tsoukas stands out as a particularly strong captain’s narrative. For me, it is the most theoretically enriched and among the most personally impassioned pieces in the collection.

But stories of hope and engagement such as this one can leave an editor open to the challenge that they are simply writing fairy tales and ignoring some of the really interesting ‘cockpit’ occurrences. In some respects, this is what appears to have occurred with Chapter 18, by the recently retired editors of the *Journal of Management Studies* (JMS), Tim Clark and Mike Wright.

While the pair are to be applauded for raising the question of the role of the publisher in the editorial process, their piece quickly moves from this topic to a more mundane prescription of an editor’s promotional activities. Now, it is known by many that JMS’s governing board, SAMS (Society for Advanced Management Studies), has been locked for a number of years in a tense battle with its publisher—now Wiley-Blackwell—over just who owns the journal. During Clark and Wright’s editorial tenure this issue—an important black box issue in my view—has swirled around them. And yet despite opening their chapter with a discussion of the role of publishers, Clark and Wright leave this black box topic firmly locked in the cockpit.

But the prize for the worst ‘captain’s tale’ really must go to Wayne Cascio’s chapter (Chapter 23). While his topic, how the editors of the *Academy of Management* (AoM) journals are selected, could have produce a rich, intriguing and politically evocative black box account, Cascio instead spends most of his chapter outlining the formal process of selection. The result is a chapter that reads like an extended job advertisement. Is the AoM really that desperate to fill these posts?

So why do these chapters fail to ‘open the black box’? There are at least four possible ways to explain this in my view. First, it seems plausible that some authors simply took a shortcut. Most editors, and certainly those responsible for well-known journals, would have made numerous presentations to audiences of prospective authors on what the journal expects. Most will consequently have a paper or presentation on such a topic lurking on their hard drives ready to be wheeled out and dusted off. Some of the chapters in this collection appear to be such efforts. Dov Eden and Don Bergh’s pieces, which provide advice to authors and reviewers, fall most easily into this camp.

The second possible culprit is simply the competitive space that editors—even retired editors—inhabit. They inevitably become part of the machinery, and thus who they are as academics is intimately tied into the promotion and protection of ‘their’ journals. One effect of this might be that even though they are present ‘in the cockpit’, so to speak, this doesn’t necessarily mean that they are able to say what’s actually going on there. They might ‘see and hear and experience’ what is occurring, but this is continually filtered by their positioning as journal ambassadors, mentors and managers, as Steve Barley notes (Chapter 4).

Third, and perhaps most importantly, editors exercise power—and some appear to be more than a little uncomfortable with this. Of course, we would hope that they exercise power based on some sensible academic judgement—whatever that might mean in the context of the journal’s field. We hope that they don’t, for example, reject papers that arrive on Mondays or those that are sitting in their Scholar One server after they have rowed with their spouses—but it’s possible.

This exercising of power over others clearly weighs heavily on some editors, and these ‘captain’s tales’ can be seen as anxiety-reducing epistles—accounts created to justify and rationalize the application of power over one’s colleagues. Such narrative inevitably constrains the production of black box accounts.

Finally, for me at least, there’s a fourth possible explanation for the predominance of ‘captain’s tales’ over black box accounts in this collection. Quite simply, many of the authors begin their explanation of events with the ‘individual’ or the ‘group’ and largely ignore the organizational and institutional context in which they are operating. Many are psychologists who frame their explanations in cognitive and behavioural vocabularies. These emphasize decision-making, preferences and interactions with others, and largely miss the nexus of professional, commercial and state/university practices by which they are positioned as editors. There are, of course, exceptions and it is worth quoting one to illustrate the point.

Some of the chapters discuss the role that an editor can play in moving a journal ‘up’ the rankings (Hodgkinson’s Chapter 11). Ranking systems are taken for granted in such chapters and framed as strategic objectives. But how have we come to discuss journals in this way? Part of the answer appears in the Co-editors’ final chapter. The key segment from that chapter is worth quoting in full.

During the 1980s and 1990s, publishers introduced many, many new journals [‘commercial processes’]. Although each of these new journals gained a small market segment, collectively they took a significant share from the established journals. Because academic libraries had to acknowledge these new entrants [‘state processes’], they shifted funds from books to journals. To make these shifts on defensible grounds, librarians focused

on journals' impact factors. In reaction, journal publishers also began to pay much more attention to impact factors, which not only indicate saleability to libraries but also the potential value of future reprints. The Institute of Information (ISI) ['commercial processes'] stopped trying to compile citations of books and limited citations to journals, which made the citation data more reliable but also increased the influence of journals over books ['professional processes']. Thus the success of journals and their editors has become a matter of citation counts. Articles that receive many citations encourage librarians to subscribe to journals and publishers to continue publishing them; articles that draw no citations may enhance their authors' resumes but they do not improve journal's visibility or economic viability. (p. 262)

What Starbuck et al. are arguing is that journal ranking became a preoccupation of universities and academics not because journals are *the same* and can thus be ranked in a scale, or that citation is necessarily that important, but rather they became involved in the struggle between publishers and libraries (the state) over the distribution of library budgets and how such budgets could be divided up between publishers. In other words, the 'motivation' of authors, reviewers and editors to be published in 'top-ranked' journals has been produced in part by the appropriation of a ranking system—based on citations—used for quite a different purpose: to decide on journal subscriptions.

If we add to this the concentration of journal ownership in four large publishers, the introduction of state-sponsored research evaluation (in some locations), and the corporatization of universities where each aims to win market share from each other, we get closer, I think, to understanding the complexities of the 'motivations' that materialize in the efforts of the authors, reviewers, and particularly the editors of journal articles (see Adler and Harzing, 2009, for further discussion).

Simply put, this isn't a book that opens the editorial black box—such a book has yet to be written. Likewise, this isn't an effective resource book for editors. It offers little in the way of advice or discussion of some of the more contentious and current issues that editors face: copyright (McSherry, 2001); open access (Oppenheimer, 2008); journal rankings (Adler and Harzing, 2009); journal price increases and ownership concentration; academic self-archiving and repositories; and the payment of reviewers and authors. Rather, it is—for the most part—a set of captain's tales that have a much more prosaic aim: to prescribe, reassure and encourage authors (particularly), reviewers and editors that the institutions they collectively enact are, while not entirely failsafe, unlikely to simply fall from the sky.

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