**Reflections on publishing ethnographic work**

**Bagga:** What's the story about this journal? How did it come about?

**Mike:** Well, it came from the symposium that we've been running since about 2005 or 2006. One of the constant discussions was how difficult it was to get published in Business and Management journals as an ethnographer. You have to explain and justify in elaborate detail the use of ethnography, by which time there's no space left in an article to explore, or expand upon your fieldwork. So there was a frustration I think that many people had. So we, and when I say we I mean Frank Worthington, Matthew Brannen and I, started up a conversation about a journal. David Weir, one of the regular symposium participants, was well connected to Emerald and he put us in contact. That's kind of where it began.

It was very explicitly about providing an outlet for people who are finding that whole publication process frustrating. The expectation from the publishers is that the journal becomes a superstar journal. But, in many ways for me, I'd be happy if it never achieved that status because its purpose is to be accessible to early career researchers in particular.

One of the jokes is what we call this journal. We came up with the Journal of Organizational Ethnography partly because it makes a good acronym. So there's always been a bit of a tension between whether its focus is on organizations or ethnography. But it is not simply a business/management journal. We have always had a very loose interpretation of organizational, and you can see that in the papers we have published, I think.

**Bagga:** I try to sort of remember what I thought of when I heard of the journal, because I think it's always very difficult to categorize your sort of fields, in a sense. I didn't particularly like the sort of organizational ethnography in management journals. I think they were, and still are, very dominated by this social science approach where you have a hypothesis and then you go out and find it. So it's very model driven, or theory. Not even theory but just model driven. A lot of management academics, they tend to say that they go out and listen to people and look at them but then you're not really convinced because they go out to test the model and whatever. It doesn't really fit with much of what I did, in a sense. So I was very happy when I discovered that you could do something else. You could actually go the other way around and look at the empirical data. Coming from classic anthropology, that was quite a relief to find an outlet that would that would be sympathetic to that.

Also, I think, with a lot of disciplines, you tend to have all these sub fields, which is, in a sense, good. But I also liked that JOE has this inter disciplinary approach in essence. We all have our different ways of approaching an organization but I think people tend to be so closed in their little circles that they sort of just know one another. You don't really get a discussion going between different disciplines. That's also why it matches quite well with the network that we had on public sector reform, in a sense, because it's a way of trying to gather people together that are interested in the same field but who do it differently. And at the same time using the same kind of method but trying to do it in different ways. So I really enjoyed that, about the journal.

I also really like that there's such a strong focus on young scholars and in helping them. If you want to develop a journal that is very prestigious and so on, then that's perhaps not the authors you're going for because there aren't too many readers of these young scholars. But I really like the approach that you have, that that they should have an outlet, just as much as the rest of us.

I was also fed up with the formalities that you meet in many of the standard journals. You have this kind of recipe that you have to go through in order to get an article published. You get so fed up with it. And I don't think that it fits ethnography very well. That’s another thing I like about JOE.

And I like that it's so easy being a guest editor. I mean, you can do anything, in a sense. Perhaps some people would like more guidance. I'm editor-in-chief of another journal and I know some of the guest editors are frightened when you say, well go ahead, do whatever. With JOE, we can ask for help but we can pretty much do whatever we want. I worked with some journals where the normal editors had too many ideas of how an article should be and how the editorial should be. I think they were frightened that we wouldn't quite fulfil their high standards.

**Mike:** You have to approve a special issue with some knowledge of the guest editors. You have to be able to trust them.

**Bagga:** With JOE, there's not this gold standard of how things should be. And that's quite a relief because I think things could be golden and all sorts of other colours. You're not too rigid on how things should be or what the topic is about or what a good article is.

**Mike:** One of the things I have found frustrating over the years is that there hasn't been as much experimentation as perhaps we hoped for. Maybe that is a result of that sense of what an article should be that so dominates the way we approach academic publishing. We, as editors, have often talked about using the electronic format, in which most work is now published, in more imaginative ways. Why can't we have embedded links and QR codes and all this kind of stuff to take us to visual or audio material? But it's hard to actually get people thinking along those lines I don't know if you remember, when we first met at the seminar in Copenhagen, there was this a paper by Michaela Schmidt (2014) on a Swiss planning office. She had an audio clip in her presentation, the sound of someone (her?) walking down a long corridor and knocking on a door. She was reading her paper with this audio going on in the background. Could you embed that in an article so that you listen to the footsteps as well as reading the description? Easy to say that. Easy to imagine that. But not that easy to do.

**Bagga:** I've often thought of how I can write, myself, in a bit more interesting way. Then I end up doing what is safe and easy. But it also links, perhaps, to the future of the journal in a sense? If we could imagine the ideal journal, that would be something to include. I think we tend to talk about these things a lot and then we don't really get to do them. It would be so much more fun to write. With a colleague, Nina, we're trying to write a book and have teamed up with a fiction writer. The way he looks at your text, even though it's kind of academic, is very stimulating because you become so much better at writing because somebody looks at how you do it. It's quite stimulating I think.

**Mike:** That reminds me of Tony Watson’s [REF] paper on ethnographic fiction science.

**Bagga:** But we have the reviewing system, and that can be a bit challenging if you want to do something a bit different.

**Mike:** There is a case for different sections in journals. We have short essays. But we have also talked about having just field notes, tales from the field if you like. They wouldn’t need to be reviewed in the normal manner and so might illustrate something of interest or illuminate some point or issue. So maybe we need to think differently about these different sections to allow for the artwork or tales about subjects rather than full research articles.

Just thinking about the review process is one of the key things. We need to develop a good understanding of our reviewers. Our reviewers understand ethnography and are familiar with what our authors are doing. But we also have to be aware that some of our reviewers are more or less open to novel forms of research. Some are more open than others to autoethnography, for example. Or to netnography or what have you. So, we do have to pick and choose reviewers a little bit. If, as editors, we think a paper has merits, then we've got to give it a chance in the review process.

**Bagga:** Another problem that that I think we are facing is that, many younger colleagues are very focused on having the right publications that can be evaluated in the right way. So there's a bit of a tension between what we think might be fun and interesting to do and then what is rewarded for people trying to make their way in academia. I don't know how to handle that. I think academics are becoming less and less courageous.

**Mike:** That's distressing to hear. I mean, that's been the case in the UK for a long time. Yeah, but with our obsession with research assessments and so forth. I think also there's this tendency to do a PhD by publication rather than a thesis. I understand it, in many ways, because you need publications to get a lecturing position after completion. A thesis is no longer enough. But it does then take away from the whole.

**Bagga:** It's also a problem because you have to start planning your articles and write them up before you have actually done the work. You don't really know what's out there before you've been out there.

**Mike:** In ethnographic research you have to be driven by what you find and what you find interesting. So ethnography is not only time consuming, it is dangerous because you can't predict your focus.

**Bagga:** We focus so narrowly on one particular part of what we do, for instance drug and alcohol stuff, but I think most of us do a lot of other different things. We observe things of interest beyond those narrow fields of interest.

**Mike:** The emphasis is so much on journal articles now that longer forms of writing are effectively discouraged. This seems to me to particularly disadvantage ethnographic work. And it is partly that the format of the article and the length of the article constrains authors so much. You feel you have to do the literature, you have to have a methodological discussion, and you're left with a couple of hundred words for the fieldwork and the description. There's so much telling and very little showing, and that's disappointing.

Having said that, I like to look back and think of some papers that particularly stand out for me, and this is a personal thing. There are some first publications for young/early career academics who have gone on to develop a really strong profile. And there are some papers that stand out for their emotional content or their deep engagement with practices. I don't particularly want to single any out.

**Bagga:** So, are you afraid that this will change when new editors take over in the future?

**Mike:** Well, we’ve just announced that we are looking to hand over to a new team. But I don't think we envisage completely kind of walking away from it. We would still support the journal and the new editors in some capacity. But that would be not to ensure they stay true to the past. I'd love to see it taken on by early career scholars, frankly. And from outside the UK. It has a very strong international readership and the authors publishing with us are from far and wide. I'd like to see it develop as an international outlet for researchers. But whoever takes it on, it is up to them where they take it then. I don't think we can or should be too precious about it if somebody wants to take it on and turn it into a top ranked journal, so be it.

**Bagga:** As I recall, you said that Danish academics have been prominent among those publishing in the journal. Do you have any idea why?

**Mike:** Anthropology is a much stronger discipline in Denmark than anywhere else, it seems to me. So, presumably there are people that are looking for an outlet. But that also reflects the fact that that an early special issue was edited by Karen Boll and Rod Rhodes. A couple of the papers were by Danes and it attracted a good deal of attention. So it's had a profile in Denmark earlier perhaps than in other countries. And there have been subsequent special issues emanating from Denmark. Ours on administrative ethnographies (volume 6, issue 2). Jeppe Oute’s on care values with Trudy Rudge (volume 8, issue 3). And recently the issue on taking sides (volume 10, issue 1) edited by Amalie Martinus Hauge, Elisabeth Naima Mikkelsen, Anne Reff Pedersen and Anja Svejgaard Pors. And there are more to come. So these things have built a string connection. And there are similar connections with Dutch colleagues, particularly at VU Amsterdam.

We'd love to be reaching out into South America, Asia and Africa. One of the things about the pandemic is that we can now reach more effectively across the world because we're using Zoom all the time. I don't think we've made the most of that opportunity, because it was sprung upon us and we have been struggling to keep up. But international seminars have become so much easier. Perhaps a new editorial team will be able to take these opportunities?

So, if you look forward, how do you see JOE developing over time?

**Bagga:** I kind of come with the more anthropological perspective. And, as I said, I really liked that you have this outlet, where we can mingle with other disciplines. I like the interdisciplinary sort of meeting place that you have actually made here. I think that works quite well. So I would really hope that it's not just taken over by anthropologist, or another discipline like sociology, but that it stays open to different disciplines. Having said that, I would think, if they knew about the journal, it would appeal to a lot of anthropologists because of the format and the way it's done. The other thing, that we discussed earlier, would be to have different formats and styles of paper.

I guess that the focus on early career scholars is also something that I think should continue to be encouraged. In the Nordic Social Work Research journal, we tried a new section on new PhDs. A page or so on a PhD that brings something new to the field. That's one way of doing it, that you have more sort of a place to showcase their work. It's not a real article. It's not even a book review. It's a place where you can display what's happening.

**Mike:** That's an interesting approach, actually. We see so many PhD students, at the symposium and in the journal, who are partway through their thesis. It would be great to let a wider audience know of their work and that they have graduated, to celebrate it a little.

**Bagga:** Another thing one could do would be to interview people in the field about their work. It could be interesting to ask people what is it that you actually do. It’s maybe not something you want to write an article about, but it might be of interest. Perhaps in dialogue with someone working in a similar field?

**Mike:** There is definitely scope within the short essay sections to do all sorts of imaginative things. It just needs some momentum, somebody with a particular idea to start it off. One thing we did try, and this was in volume 2, was to think about work not published in English that we might be able to bring to a wider audience. That was an idea we tried to run with, but we got no takers and no suggestions. Perhaps it needs a more international editorial board to identify such work?

Well, these are some good ideas for developing the journal. Perhaps something for a younger and more energetic team to take up?

**References**

Schmidt, M. (2014), ‘Starting the administrative engine: How a building project becomes an administrative case’. Papers presented to the *Administrative Ethnographies* workshop, Copenhagen.

Watson, T.