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What Do Reviewers Want? Reflections on Editing the Journal for the Past Year

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What Do Reviewers Want? Reflections on Editing the Journal for the Past Year

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ABSTRACT

The peer review process can be challenging. In this essay, the journal's editor and editorial assistant present a summary of reviewers' comments to authors from the past year. In presenting themes across 79 reviews, this essay arms authors with knowledge about reviewers' expectations for manuscripts submitted to the journal. A secondary aim of this essay is to encourage reviewers to continue providing supportive and helpful feedback. As the journal heads into its third year of publishing, we are well on our way to creating the first home for high-quality risk and crisis communication research from around the globe.

KEYWORDS: Risk; crisis; communication; reviewers; peer review

A common joke among academics is that Reviewer 2 embodies everything wrong with the peer review process, including providing unhelpful, unclear, obnoxious, and destructive feedback (Brown, 2015). At the time of writing this essay, the “Reviewer 2 Must Be Stopped!” Facebook group had nearly 19,000 members, and similar communities existed on Twitter. In an article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Duncan (2018) categorized reviewers into three categories: Type 1 reviewers read manuscripts carefully and offer feedback that is helpful and specific; Type 2 reviewers provide general feedback that is difficult to address, in part because these reviewers do not carefully read manuscripts; Type 3 reviewers exert their power rather than providing constructive feedback. We are happy to report that the vast majority of reviewers for the *Journal of International Crisis and Risk Communication Research* are Type 1 reviewers.

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In this essay, we reflect on the comments reviewers have provided to authors over the past year. In doing so, we aim to arm authors with the knowledge required to submit strong manuscripts. A secondary aim is to encourage reviewers to continue providing supportive and helpful feedback. Our goal is to detect patterns in reviewers' comments as well as important outliers. To accomplish this goal, we used the qualitative analysis program NVivo to jointly code the anonymous reviews.¹ In this essay, we present our key findings from multiple rounds of coding. All reviewers' comments from the past year were downloaded from the online submission system, any identifying information was removed, and comments were uploaded into the NVivo qualitative analysis software. We split the comments into two sections and engaged in first-round coding, identifying whether comments referred to the following sections: literature review, methods, results, discussion, and general writing issues. We then engaged in axial coding, further subcategorizing the codes in each section to better describe the properties of each initial section (Saldaña, 2015). We organize this essay by summarizing reviewers' comments on the common sections of manuscripts and crosscutting feedback.

Summary of Reviewer Comments

Literature Review

Reviewers frequently note that authors have insufficient and/or underdeveloped literature to ground their research. To improve literature reviews, recommendations include writing a comprehensive review, not just a review of sampled studies; including key studies, even if they are older "classics"; incorporating the most recent research; and clearly connecting each section of the literature review. Additionally, literature reviews should accurately summarize prior research and justify why some concepts and theories are included and others are not. For empirical research, reviewers note that literature reviews must justify the need for proposed research questions and hypotheses. For all manuscripts, reviewers ask for streamlined literature reviews to allow space for the other important parts of manuscripts. In short, reviewers are deep experts in crisis and risk communication and expect manuscripts to

reflect topic-matter expertise. When literature reviews were thorough, well argued, and logically organized, reviewers complimented authors for these noted strengths.

In terms of theories covered in literature reviews, some reviewers critique authors for selecting outdated or mismatched theories. Reviewers often comment on theory, including asking for the addition of well-developed theoretical frameworks when manuscripts do not include theory. When proposing new models or theories, reviewers request adequate justification for why new models or theories are needed.

Methods

The journal is open to any method, and thus reviewer comments were fairly diverse, because they were closely connected to the specific methods used. These methods include case studies, interviews, big data analysis, content analysis, systematic literature reviews, surveys, and experiments. Despite the variety of methods, generally, comments on methods can be categorized into three major concerns: sampling and study design, operationalization of variables, and analysis. Across all of these areas, reviewers show a clear preference for detailed methods sections.

Sampling and study design. Across methods, reviewers ask authors to justify their samples. For example, in case studies, authors should explain why they selected certain cases and not others. Reviewers sometimes criticize authors for selecting cases that are out of date. MechanicalTurk (Mturk) is a popular data collection site, but information about recruiting via Mturk, and indeed recruiting for all samples, is needed. For example, reviewers asked, What was the call for participants? What incentives were participants offered? How was data cleaning undertaken? and What was the completion rate? Furthermore, reviewers request that authors explicitly state the limitations of their sampling strategies. In terms of study design, reviewers request clear, step-by-step explanations for all research designs. Reviewers further ask for appendices that include study manipulations in the case of experiments, interview protocols in the case of qualitative research, search terms and databases employed in the case of systematic reviews, and

information about how social media posts were collected and in what time frame in the case of social media analysis.

Operationalization. Reviewers sometimes express concern with the operationalization of variables, especially when variables central to analysis are measured with only one item or when multidimensional concepts are measured with single items unlikely to capture the concept's different dimensions. Alternatively, some reviewers express concern about low scale reliability. There was also concern that operationalizations of certain concepts did not match their conceptualizations and, in fact, were not measuring what they were intended to measure (i.e., they lacked validity). In content analyses in particular, reviewers call for clear explanation of how codes were applied, including providing exemplars for each code to aid understanding. Reviewers further call for explanation of how codebooks were developed. For experimental and survey research, reviewers ask authors to clearly report at least one exemplar question used to measure each central variable. Reviewers also need specific information about what covariates were measured. A final area of concern for some reviewers is when concepts central to certain theories were not captured in measurements or analysis.

Analysis. Reviewer comments regarding analytic methods vary widely, depending on the method used. Generally, reviewers ask authors to explain why the chosen analytic method was appropriate given the available data and hypotheses/research questions. They also ask for clear explanations for methods employed. A common request for quantitative research is for authors to push their analyses further by using more sophisticated analytic techniques. Some reviewers remind authors of the importance of only reporting analyses that correspond to written hypotheses or research questions.

Results

In general, there were fewer concerns specific to research results compared to other sections of submitted manuscripts. For quantitative studies, reviewers sometimes note a lack of precision and detail in reporting results. For example, reviewers ask authors to clarify whether they were reporting standardized or unstandardized coefficients. For qualitative research, reviewers often call for more rich details and additional ex-

amples to demonstrate themes. Overall, reviewers find the inclusion of subheadings in results sections helpful. Subheadings may correspond with research questions or hypotheses to signal to the reader alignment between methods and results. Tables and figures are also useful and concise ways to represent results. Finally, for all research, reviewers recommend using precise language to convey findings accurately.

Discussion and Conclusions

For all methods, reviewers call on authors to move beyond a review of their findings in the discussion section. Instead, authors should engage past literature and provide practical and theoretical implications drawn from their findings. Reviewers recommend tying conclusions back to the extant research—including relevant research that may not have been included in the literature review. When authors are interpreting findings, reviewers ask authors to articulate the new contributions that their research makes. Practical contributions should be specific and actionable. Contributions to theory also should be specific. Reviewers note that misalignment between findings and implications drawn is a common pitfall of discussion sections. Reviewers also frequently recommend using tentative language, rather than definitive language, in attempts to generalize findings to theory and practice.

Crosscutting Issues

Reviewers provided some comments on issues that pertain to multiple parts of manuscripts, as summarized in the following paragraphs.

“So what” issues. One of the most challenging aspects of research can be justifying the “so what” of a project. Unsurprisingly, reviewers often comment on the “so what” issue. First, the introduction and literature review must clearly and persuasively justify the “so what.” Part of this justification includes a deep understanding of the literature. In terms of how to specifically justify the “so what” of a project, reviewers recommend considering how the research contributes to society, theory building, methodological advancement, and/or risk and crisis communication practice. Reviewers urge authors to make explicit reference to how their research extends, clarifies, or corrects past research in the discussion and conclusion section of manuscripts. In short, to address

the “so what” issue, authors can answer questions such as, Why is this study important? How can it improve practice? How can it develop theory? and What gaps does it fill?

General writing issues. Reviewers frequently express concerns about writing. These concerns can be categorized into four general areas: grammar mistakes or spelling typos, lack of attention to American Psychological Association (APA) style, lack of flow, and verbosity. Grammar and/or spelling errors distract reviewers and, in some cases, impede understanding of manuscripts. Reviewers often suggest that authors conduct thorough proofreading of their work and pay careful attention to APA style. While recognizing the international scope of the journal and the importance of diverse voices in crisis and risk communication scholarship, many reviewers recommend the use of a copy editor, especially for authors who do not appear to be native English speakers. Furthermore, reviewers call for consistency in terms throughout manuscripts and ask authors to avoid passive voice, ensure subject–verb agreement, and employ appropriate word choice. The editorial team is committed to continuing to work with authors who are not native English speakers; yet, it is important to realize that reviewers have persistent concerns with writing for many manuscripts submitted to the journal.

Other writing issues are stylistic in nature. Reviewers note that manuscripts are often too long, sometimes as a result of unfocused literature reviews. Repetition in the author’s own writing also unnecessarily increases length, and reviewers ask authors to make their manuscripts more succinct. Tips for improving the flow and length of a manuscript include avoiding redundancy in the introduction and literature review, adding subheaders, avoiding long paragraphs, and organizing the manuscript according to APA guidelines. Thinking of an article like an hourglass is a useful visualization: Start off broad in the introduction and narrow in as the article presents hypotheses/research questions, methods, and findings. Broaden out again in the discussion and conclusion sections. In terms of flow, reviewers note two common issues with introductions: an insufficient introduction that jumps too quickly to the literature review or an introduction that does not introduce the topic at hand or explain why it is important to

study. Reviewers recommend strong thesis or purpose statements at the end of introductions to give readers a framework for the importance of the study. The target article length for the journal is 25 total pages, including references (the abstract and cover page do not count toward that limit).

Manuscript strengths. The majority of reviewers are constructive and sometimes take time to note manuscripts' strengths. Generally, reviewers praise authors for focusing on interesting topics, such as crisis events of great significance to many, topics that illustrate unique deficiencies in crisis literature, and topics that provide fresh perspectives on risk or crisis communication theory. Studies with novel data and/or approaches also receive praise. As discussed, reviewers enjoy reading manuscripts with strong introductions that persuasively articulate the "so what," employ clear and compelling writing, and have well-organized literature reviews. Finally, manuscripts with sophisticated analyses that lead to significant theoretical and/or applied advancements are highly commended.

Conclusion

When we accepted the offer to edit this journal more than a year ago, we were entering unknown territory: Would we receive sufficient quality research? Would reviewers provide consistently helpful feedback? Would the journal fulfill its mission of providing the first home for cutting-edge, open-access crisis and risk communication scholarship? As is evident in the articles published over the past 2 years, we are well on our way to fulfilling our mission, a mission that includes publishing scholarship from emerging and well-established scholars from around the globe. This essay further demonstrates that reviewers are indeed providing quality feedback. By lifting the veil of secrecy behind the peer review process, our intent in this essay is to help authors submit even higher quality scholarship to the journal. Together we can continue to build the premier peer-reviewed journal for crisis and risk communication scholarship.

Brooke Fisher Liu, PhD, concentrates her research on investigating how government messages, media, and interpersonal communication can motivate people to successfully respond to and recover from disasters. Liu is an associate professor of communication at the University of Maryland, where she leads the Risk Communication and Resilience Research Program at START, a U.S. Department of Homeland Security Center of Excellence. Liu's research has been funded by government agencies such as the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the National Science Foundation (NSF), and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).

Samantha J. Stanley, MA, is a doctoral candidate in the department of communication at the University of Maryland. Her research investigates the confluence of identity, communication, and health-relevant outcomes in contexts such as e-cigarette and cigarette use, HPV vaccination, and patient-provider relationships.

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Note

1. The University of Maryland Institutional Review Board (IRB) was consulted to determine whether this essay constituted human subjects research, thus necessitating informed consent. The IRB determined that this essay is “not research.”

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