

Publishing in German Sociology in the Year 2030

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Prognoses about the future that go beyond the coming days, weeks and months are always at risk of becoming ridiculed. The observer in the future looking back will see the author's hubris to assess the future development and will find it easy to identify deviations from the predicted course of events. When it comes to computers – or more generally digitisation – there should be even more caution as unfulfilled prognoses are legion. Not too long ago, it was inconceivable that there would be a need for personal computers. Soon after, the notion that the use of paper in offices would come to an end was widespread. In the recent past, the marketability of the tablet computer was met with doubt, and from the perspective of the classic media, the social media platform Facebook was considered merely an 'index' in the web. Precisely these experiences with information and communication technologies make the saying 'everything that can be invented has already been invented'¹ seem meaningless. Therefore, the following shall not be a prognosis of the future but a description of what would be desirable for publishing in sociology in the year 2030. Thus, a prognosis is replaced by a utopia.

Status quo

If one looks from the perspective of other disciplines at how we, sociologists from Germany, inform each other about research results, then one would think it is highly deficient. First of all, there seems to be no unity in the communication: it cannot be described along one axis but only in terms

¹ The source of this often-used quote is unclear. It is wrong, however, that it was made by Charles Duell, who from 1899–1902 was Commissioner of the United States Patent and Trademark Office.

of several dimensions. One divide lies between theoretical sociology and quantitative empirical sociology. The former considers itself to be part of an intellectual discourse, while the latter tends towards a communication ideal of the natural sciences. One side cherishes the printed book; the other the peer-reviewed journal article. A second discrepancy can be found between German-speaking and English-speaking sociology. One side considers the publication in English a prerequisite for excellence; the other side finds a work written in German sufficient. There are even more breaks between different schools and approaches of theoretical and methodological nature. They go hand in hand with different ratings of different journals and publishing companies. These disunities are the expression of a plural understanding of quality within the discipline.

Publication activity is distributed in a strange way: there are only a small number of peer-reviewed journals in German-speaking sociology, and the community is only weakly represented in journals published in English. This may not only be because sociologists from Germany submit few articles to foreign journals. Another reason may be that the journals consider themselves to be voices of sociology of the respective countries and that they are not entirely internationalised. Thus, nearly two thirds of articles appear in a medium of dubious reputation, an anthology whose publication logic evokes irritation or even amusement among scientists from other disciplines. The slowest contributor determines the time of publication. The period between writing and publication thus often spans across several years. The decision about worthiness of publication of submitted manuscripts is subject to individual assessment and the available time of the editors. Quality criteria are thus hard to follow, also because contributions are usually 'invited', and a reversal of that decision is not considered to be a tolerable practice of editors. The unclear reputation of some anthologies is also to the detriment of quality, so that authors do not always strive to achieve the highest level while being aware of the editors' needs – keywords here are 'risk of failure of anthologies', 'coherence of the volume' and 'length of the manuscript announced to the publisher'. All this is well known and yet we (sociologists) all participate.

My third comment on the status quo refers to the publishing landscape in general. German-speaking journals, anthologies and monographs are produced by a significant number of small publishing companies that are in part managed by their owners. This surely does not only entail disadvantages. Close collaboration and short ways of communication make it possible to correspond to the individual standards of publication and production. For the last couple of years, Springer VS, a large international publishing company, has been successfully active in the discipline. Problematic developments, such as the establishment of an oligopoly and increased prices, as is the case in the

natural and engineering sciences as well as medicine, have so far not been apparent in sociology. Not least due to the structure of the publishers, however, digital publication in sociology is only slowly on the rise. Many publishing companies are too small to pursue individual strategies of digitisation and thus seek cooperation with other publishers and libraries in order to make electronic publication possible. Springer VS, however, did not have to take such small steps. Since it could make use of the distributing platform of its mother company, it was possible to make the entire portfolio digitally available within a short period of time.

2030 – Digital open access publications

Which developments can be expected for the year 2030 against this background? One hope is that the discipline will neither adopt the forms of publication of the natural sciences nor that it will remain entirely untouched by larger, cross-disciplinary trends. Rather, it should become familiar with the opportunities of digital publication and develop a publishing culture that uses these potentials in a productive manner.

Dissemination of digital publication

In spite of some aversions and eventually unwarranted fears with respect to digital publication, it will have become standard by the year 2030. This is due to its possibilities of accessibility, reception, and connection with qualitative and quantitative research data, the utilisation of data and text mining tools and not least its automatic searchability. However, the intellectual culture of the printed book lives on, albeit to a smaller extent than is the case today. The notion has persevered that the reception of complex texts requires a format that is 'handy', and this format is the printed monograph. Within the discipline, it continues to exist parallel to the electronic version, in particular in sociological theory, where the proportion of dual published monographs has stabilised around 10% by the year 2030.

Fate of the anthology

In quantitative terms, the anthology has lost its significance dramatically, but it persists in coherent and carefully conceptualised volumes that are also well curated by their editors. The majority of research articles, however, appear in thematically established smaller journals whose existence goes back to a wave of foundations in the 2020s. These do not follow the natural science model of double-blind peer review. Due to the multi-paradigmatic diversity of the discipline, the model of the better anthologies was adopted, namely the model of a constructive evaluation. Here, those involved know each

other, the reviewers work closely with the author and provide advice for the further development of a text. This procedure is applied by a large number of newly founded journals. Occasionally, authors suggest reviewers and the satisfaction with the results of the procedure is surprisingly high. There are even individual reports about research co-operations that originated from this non-blind constructive peer review. Due to lobbying by the discipline, the model is recognised and supported by the funding organisations.

Publishing landscape

Fortunately, the diversity of the publishing companies within the discipline was maintained. During the founding of the journals, attention was paid to the fact that the ownership rights to the titles remained with the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie* (German Society of Sociology), or with individual research institutions. At the same time, the diverse personal contacts to the publishing companies were used to develop feasible financing models on the basis of publication fees that would give the publishers a stronger degree of security in planning than was previously the case with the decreasing sales number of printed anthologies. Moreover, this way, free accessibility in the framework of the gold OA model could be realised. The obligation to deliver standardised metadata to a specialised information service made it possible to create an index for almost all publications of the discipline, which is welcomed by the interested public as well as other sociologists because the latter no longer have to ask themselves whether they are overlooking pertinent publications.

Probabilities

The ways by which research results in sociology are announced will undoubtedly have changed by 2030. But, how strong is the probability of such a publication culture in sociology that is based on digital, freely accessible journals? This question cannot be answered fully and if it were possible, this text would turn into a prognosis. However, some factors can be pointed out that, in all likelihood, will influence the development of the publication culture in the future. It can be expected that the assessment of research performance in the framework of formal procedures of research evaluation will continue to play an important role in the course of recruitments and proposals for third-party funding. A sociology that primarily focuses on publications in anthologies will undoubtedly have considerable difficulties in this context. In view of the publication culture of other disciplines, this type of publication is not considered of high reputation. In recruitment procedures, its status is controversial, and in proposals for third-party funding, journal articles are required. Thus, the tendency is against the publication of articles in anthologies. Pressure to change, however, could also come from strategies

in science policy that promote OA publishing. If there will indeed be a shift in libraries from purchasing to subscription budgets, which will then finance gold OA publications, the culture of anthologies within sociology will enter troubled waters. The current guidelines on the use of these funds refer to other publication types, namely reviewed articles in OA journals. If this remained the case, the discipline would be in danger of being cut off. There would then be the opportunity to advocate change in the guidelines of publication funds, to fight for the reservation of funds from the library budget for the acquisition of anthologies or to use the opportunity to reform the ways in which the circulation of research results is organised within the discipline.

Turning to my final point: the question of how we will publish in the year 2030 primarily depends on how the discipline itself reacts to opportunities and challenges of digital publishing and whether it will be able to position itself with respect to this ongoing change. Sociology has a weak degree of organisation but it has also been able to surprise more than once. Therefore, a broad discussion of a desirable future of publishing does not seem impossible.