

On Writing, Surviving, and Thriving in Communication and Media Studies

Commentary

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In “On Writing in Communication and Media Studies,” Pablo J. Boczkowski and Michael X. Delli Carpini paint a bleak picture of the writing demands placed on junior scholars. On one hand, expectations around scholarly output are ratcheting up. Undergraduate students need authorship credits to gain admission into graduate school; graduate students must have several first- or solo-authored papers to secure tenure-track jobs; and assistant professors must publish at the dizzying rate of several high-impact articles per year to earn tenure. At the same time, the plurality of writing formats and audiences a scholar must master has grown beyond monographs and journal articles to include edited and coauthored work, conference papers, blog posts, op-eds, and social media (not to mention commented code packages, curated data, experimental preregistration, and other writing-adjacent forms of output that are increasingly required to publish in our field). Implicit in these dual increases is an untenable demand on junior scholars’ time. Junior scholars must produce more writing, in more formats, and for more audiences than ever before. As a newly minted associate professor with tenure, I am, quite frankly, exhausted. And I am one of the lucky ones.

I am lucky because of the privilege of my demographics and the opportunities that came more easily to me as a result. I am lucky for my academic pedigree, including the connections and financial resources it provided along the way. And I am lucky to have had a supportive and politically savvy set of mentors who guided me through the tenure and promotion process with wisdom and kindness. All these privileges afforded me the luxury of more flexibility in my choices than most, including the luxury to ignore well-intentioned advice about the types of writing that are likely to yield promotion and tenure. I was told, multiple times and in no uncertain terms, not to coauthor too frequently before tenure. This is good advice, yet it is advice I am grateful I ignored.

Boczkowski and Delli Carpini highlight how coauthorship can “serve as an important form of mentorship for graduate students and junior colleagues.” Reflecting on my own writing practice, I would double down on this idea: Coauthorship provides essential support that junior scholars need to survive and thrive amid the mounting demands of academic writing. There are some obvious ways this is true. Coauthorship allows scholars to broaden the scope of their publications, joining together with experts from different domains to (ideally) produce scholarship none could achieve alone. Pragmatically, coauthorship allows writers to divide their attention among multiple projects. When done well, taking on a combination of lead- and trailing-author roles can help scholars increase their overall publication count relative to what they might produce alone. Moreover, some evidence suggests that collaborative papers tend to be of higher quality and higher impact than solo-authored work (Franceschet & Costantini, 2010). Insofar as junior

scholars are rated not only on volume but also on the quality and impact of their work (as they should be), collaboration is helpful.

Less obvious are the supportive coalitions that form among collaborating authors. When Boczkowski and Delli Carpini highlight the mentorship that happens in collaborative work, I think they were probably imagining senior, tenured faculty publishing with junior faculty and graduate students. This is undoubtedly helpful, especially for junior scholars with few prior experiences with the academic publication process. Even the best writers will never publish anything without navigating the confusing and unfamiliar processes of submission, revision, responding to reviewers, working with editors, and so on. Revealing the so-called hidden syllabus of tips and tricks to navigate these processes successfully is an essential part of successful academic writing, and it is centrally embedded in senior-junior partnerships.

At the same time, my most fulfilling and indispensable coauthorship experiences have been with scholars in the same career phase. Of course, these partnerships are productive in terms of output and impact. Junior scholars facing the same writing demands are good at motivating one another to keep up the pace. But more importantly, and infrequently discussed, are the networks of support and encouragement that emerge among peer collaborators. Throughout my graduate school and pre-tenure years, collaborative writing sessions often became impromptu support groups as we helped one another navigate the shared challenges of work, life, and family. In these closed-door sessions, we could drop the high-minded pretense of academic professionalism and work through the real, vulnerable, human things we all faced. At various times, my writing partners and I have celebrated book contracts, grants, scholarly awards, graduations, engagements, pregnancies, new homes, and new jobs. We have also counseled each other through rejections, failed studies, missed job opportunities, cruel teaching evaluations, harassment, assault, gaslighting, pregnancy loss, divorce, devastating medical diagnoses, and a broad range of public tragedies that we were called on to respond to professionally while still processing the very personal implications of the day's news.

There is labor in collaborative writing; labor that is infrequently acknowledged for the value it provides to our discipline. Rather than viewing a coauthored piece as scientific labor split two, three, or more ways, we might instead acknowledge and reward the scientific and emotional support inherently baked into these partnerships. The irony of much well-intentioned academic writing advice is that it encourages scholars to prioritize independent scholarship to advance their careers. Yet a singular focus on independent scholarship may shut scholars off from the very relationships we need to survive our careers. As we embark on a reconsideration of how we assess various writing endeavors, let us be mindful of creating a system that rewards the forms of scholarship that most sustain us.

Reference

Franceschet, M., & Costantini, A. (2010). The effect of scholar collaboration on impact and quality of academic papers. *Journal of Informetrics*, 4(4), 540–553.