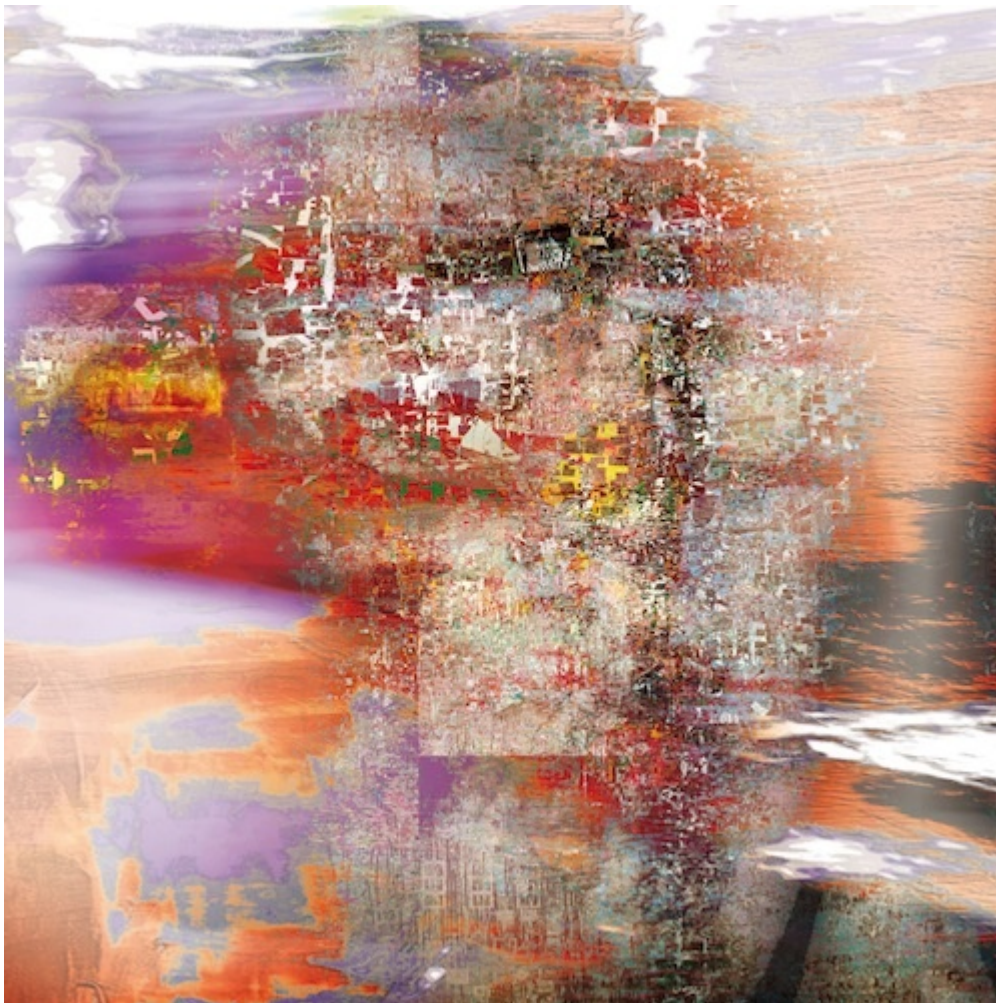


# The future of scientific journals.

Par Igor Moullier. Le 23 April 2013



On the occasion of its one hundredth issue (“Faire des sciences sociales du politique”, *Politix*, 100, 2012/4), the journal *Politix* offers a series of retrospective points of view following three contributions: one by two members of the journal’s committee, the other two from outside contributors, Pierre Favre and Michel Offerlé. These different points of view allow us to appreciate the evolution of a journal whose project is interdisciplinarity: it seeks to introduce social science methods – at the time those belonging to Pierre Bourdieu’s sociology – into political sciences. Whilst discussing different views on the evolution of fields and social actors, these three contributions converge on the description of a series of phenomena: the transition to peer review, the decline of the historical approach for the benefit of area studies and the diversification of thematics have all contributed to making *Politix* a mainstream journal.

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Thus this issue of *Politix* offers a valuable case study on what is involved in editing a journal in social sciences. In order to illustrate the difficulties concerning the recognition of an interdisciplinary approach, F. Sawicki and J.L. Briquet take great delight in reproducing the refusal letters issued by certain institutions (CNRS, Presses de Sciences Po) in the 1990s. The transition from a leading journal, with a greatly involved Editing committee who alone ensures much of the evaluation work, to the more standardised style of peer review, will remind many other editorial boards of what they have experienced.

Other than a retrospective exercise, this issue of *Politix* offers some insights concerning the future of scientific journals. Some of these insights, such as the reflections of Pierre Favre on the changing of paradigms, are more specific to the field of political science. Others are, more generally, relevant to the field of social science, as are the two other documents of this issue, dedicated to study fields and controversies. In the context of recent debates which have animated the editorial world on Open Access, the conclusive remarks of Pierre Favre's contribution deserve reflection. By pointing the fact that the creation of a journal can be a means for a generation of researchers to take new paradigms further, Favre underlines the fact that this approach is at risk of disappearing with the arrival of electronic publishing: the journals are specialising and shifting from general theoretical problems to approaches that are both more empiric based and more restricted to specialized problematics. This specialization is also reinforced by the change in reading practices: "Aujourd'hui déjà, l'usage de Persée et de Cairn a pour conséquence que la majorité des lecteurs isolent un article parmi la série d'articles assemblés et s'en tiennent là". Thus "faire revue" becomes more difficult. New selection criteria and prioritization are to be invented. Does a place for general journals who deal with epistemological and theoretical matters still exist?

Other elements could reinforce the tendency that Favre describes: the multiplication of blogs and research notebooks (like hypotheses.org), the incentives for researchers to submit pre-printed versions of their articles (on Hal-Shs or Academia.edu), the dissemination of *working papers* are all practices which can short circuit the practice of evaluating journals. Thus one can read on an Academia.edu blog: "it seems that posting his pre-published peer-reviewed papers on Academia.edu not only accelerates science by filling the publishing gap; it also airs the quid-pro-quo game live, giving younger academics a chance to play — helping them en route to tenure or to get recognized by a search committee".

The recent debate in the francophone community between those supporting Cairn and those supporting Open Access swings between economic considerations (producing a journal of social sciences is not free) and general principles (freedom of access to knowledge). *EspacesTemps.net* recognises itself in both ways: at its birth, the journal made the choice to be free, but as scientific and editorial work is costly, this is only possible thanks to the support of institutional partners and the involvement of the members of the Editorial Board. However, the real question for the future of journals in the electronic age is perhaps their contribution to scientific production. On the one hand the model "publish or perish" has imposed the scientific article as the criteria central to the evaluation of researchers. On the other hand, the slow transition to electronic publishing asks the question of the function of journals, of their economic viability and their evolution in a context where researchers will be provided with new ways of auto-publishing. Will journals continue to play their key role and by the evaluation function they fulfil for example? The limits of peer review are starting to be widely acknowledged: a tendency toward standardisation, a methodological sophistication which is sometimes sterile, a search for novelty to the detriment of reliability (which has been noted for example in the case of some controversial articles published by *Nature* or *Science*). These phenomena are not new however. In the study published in the *American Journal*

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of *Sociology*, Andrew Abbott reports that those in charge of the journal worried in the 1970s that the articles submitted were more and more “competent but boring” (Abbott, 1999). Electronic publishing only adds to the already numerous questions concerning, for example, the temporality of articles: is it possible to shorten the cycle of article evaluation without diminishing quality? It is this sort of question that *EspacesTemps* wishes to debate through a survey on alternative modes of evaluation and a day of general discussion will be organized in the framework of the “Printanières” on the 28 and 29<sup>th</sup> May. This debate does not only concern the future of journals however. More largely, it examines the role of evaluation in science. Aside from academic evaluation (thesis committees, recruitments), the journals and their reading committees form a second level of evaluation, which is decentralized but organized around identified and recognized centers. Would an increase in the speed at which articles are published, and therefore at which scientific information spreads, compensate for the weakening of the role journals and peer review have? Will the questioning of peer review, on a scientific or material basis, mechanically reinforce the weight other forms of academic evaluations have? These are the types of questions that now arise.

## Bibliographie

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