

Preconceptions, Lessons Learned, and Other Changes: Three Editors' Journeys

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As we end our respective tenures as editors of *Entrepreneurship Theory & Practice (ET&P)*; D. Ray Bagby, 33+ years), *Family Business Review (FBR)*; Pramodita Sharma, 9 years), and *Journal of Business Venturing (JBV)*; Dean Shepherd, 8 years), we reflect on our preconceptions about journal publishing as we came into the job, lessons we learned along the way, and the changes we observed in our field. We end this editorial with some thoughts of our expectations for the future of entrepreneurship and family business studies.

Our Launch Pads

The starting point into the editing job was different for each of us as was the scope and size of each journal we were charged to lead. It was in 1984 that Ray took over as the editor of the *American Journal of Small Business (AJSB)*. This journal was 8 years old (started at the University of Baltimore in 1976) and was struggling in many ways. For example, it had no well-defined concept or mission, had decreased in quality of content, had a low subscription rate/financial problems, and did not follow generally accepted practices for scholarly publications. *AJSB* was one of the three English-language journals focused on small business along with *Journal of Small Business Management (JSBM)*, began 1963) and *Journal of Small Business-Canada (JSBC)*, began 1983) in the field. However, Elsevier Publishing was planning to launch *JBV* in 1985 with Ian MacMillan (then at New York University) as editor. Although the initial focus of *JBV* was more toward corporate entrepreneurship, it signaled the beginning of the field of entrepreneurship and a higher standard of quality than had been typical prior to that time. In 1988, Ray moved to Baylor University, which purchased the journal (*AJSB*) and renamed it *Entrepreneurship Theory & Practice (ET&P)* to position it better in the growing field. Baylor University provided financial stability and the support to allow the journal to grow and thrive. Then, in 2015 SAGE Publishing purchased the journal.

FBR was 22 years old when Pramodita (aka Dita) took over as its editor in October 2008. She had served as associate editor since 2005 with the previous editor Joe Astrachan. While *FBR* was founded in 1988 by its parent association—the Family Firm Institute (FFI)—its production had just been transferred from Wiley-Blackwell Publishers to SAGE Publishing. In 2006, *FBR* had crossed the milestone of receiving more than 100 submissions and in summer of 2008 received its first Impact Factor of 0.675. Interest in family business research was gaining momentum in several regions of the world, as authors from 22 countries submitted their work for publication consideration in 2007. *FBR* sought to publish “new research findings, frameworks, and methodologies for business in family firms; . . . theories and research on factors that affect family dynamics and organizational issues; . . . international, gender, generational, and legal and financial issues specific to family businesses” (December 2008 *FBR*, p. 373).

When Dean took over the leadership of the *JBV* in 2009, this Elsevier-published journal was 23 years old and was on a strong footing after the editorship of S. Venkataraman (aka Venkat). At the end of his first full year as editor-in-chief, the 1-year impact factor of the journal was 2.149, which was consistent with *ET&P* but below the other leading disciplinary journals and general management journals. Some schools were considering *JBV* as an “A” for promotion and tenure decisions but there were also a number of schools that were holding back—relegating entrepreneurship journals (and, by extension, entrepreneurship scholars) as second tier.

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Despite the many flaws with using impact factors to judge the quality of a scholar's work, the dichotomous categorization of journals as "A" or "not A" was argued based on impact factors.

Given the differences in the journals under our care and our doctoral training in different parts of the world (Australia for Dean, Canada for Dita, and the United States for Ray), our preconception in preparing this piece was that we would have varied perspectives on the job, the journal, our field, and its players. Instead, we were surprised by the similarity of our thoughts and experiences. Nevertheless, we note differences that emerged in our experiences and mind-sets.

The Exogenous Influencers

Our doctoral training had embedded the dictum of "publish or perish" in us. So we came into the editors' job expecting some pressure from authors, particularly those whose work we had to reject. What we underestimated, however, were the additional pressures that "bonuses" for getting published in the "right" journals would create. Adding to the complexity was the fact that the definition of "right" continued to shift over the years, and from institution to institution, as new rankings and listings appeared. In the same year, the journals under our charge could range from being "the most desired" to "not an interesting outlet" in locations just a short flight away, or with the release of impact factors or other journal listings. In negotiating such confusing signals, we learned the importance of staying true to the basics of rigor and relevance, integrity and diligence, as we appointed each member of our editorial team, and processed each manuscript.

We had assumed that the quality and impact of the journal's content would automatically be reflected in schools' lists for promotion and tenure, and perhaps even in external lists of journal rankings. Alas, we underestimated the role played by exogenous factors such as the age of a journal, contextual external environment, as well as within university or departmental influencers such as the culture and/or politics, egos, and (at times) personal agendas of the more established or dominating scholars.

Operating under the overcast of journal rankings, we had expected that the editors of different journals would compete intensely. So we were pleasantly surprised by the norm of cooperation and support among editors within the fields of entrepreneurship and family business. As editors

we realized that an incoming tide raises all boats. In addition, we suspect it is the culture of cooperation and support embedded in the Entrepreneurship Division—a Division that each of us has called home—that attracts a different breed of scholars with inclusive mind-sets, and these individuals became journal editors over time. Nevertheless, having this support and the feeling of ease in reaching out to each other for advice was extremely helpful, making the job a pleasant experience on most days.

Size and Scope of the Job and the Journal

The number of articles published per year in the three journals under our care varied significantly. *ET&P* (in the last 5 years) has typically published 48 to 58 articles a year, while submissions ranged from 470 to 600+. *FBR* has published between 16 and 22 articles a year, and submissions increased from 100 to about 250 by the end of Dita's term as editor. *JBV* published about 45 articles per year and submissions increased from about 350 to about 850 during Dean's tenure.

While the number of published articles remained relatively stable during our tenures, each of us experienced significant growth in the number of submissions received. While exciting to experience increased interest in our chosen fields of study, the "boiling frog parable" felt like a good description of the job at times. On the face of it, reporting higher number of submissions that inevitably leads to lower acceptance rates felt like an indicator of success. But secretly most of us wished we received not more but fewer and higher quality submissions to process. Never lost in our thoughts was the fact that it was not how many manuscripts we received and rejected that determines the impact of a journal; instead, it is the quality of output published that counts for the influence of a journal.

To catch the overflow of papers that were interesting yet lacked a necessary requirement to be published in *JBV* (e.g., lacked theory), Dean and Dima Dimov created the *Journal of Business Venturing Insights*. This was a way of keeping *JBV* true to its mission but also broaden the scope and the number of articles to be published by this new journal group. Similarly, *FFI Practitioner* was launched by *FBR*'s parent association to provide an outlet for works directed toward advisors and practitioners. A clear and pragmatic linkage was established between *FBR* and *FFI Practitioner*. Once articles were accepted in *FBR*, its assistant editor¹ and

members of the journal's "Research Applied Board" prepared practitioner-focused summaries of these articles that were disseminated through the *FFI Practitioner* and newsletters of leading Family Business Centers around the world. SAGE launched the *SAGE Business Cases* to provide an outlet for family business cases.

Even more surprising than the volume of processing manuscripts was the scope of the job² and the number of salient stakeholders with legitimate interests in the journal that had to be managed effectively. Examples include authors, reviewers, editorial team members, publishers, associations, other journal editors, and media.³ Each of these key stakeholders had somewhat different goals and needs, and thus required mindful managing, as each had the ability to significantly influence research published in the journal and its eventual impact on the field. But this list veils the within-category differences and nuances to be managed as we explain below.

Authors and Reviewers

As researchers, we were most familiar with the roles of authors and reviewers. Thus, we had preconceived notions of the mind-sets of these two key stakeholder groups. However, it is the within-group variations in behaviors that we underestimated. For example, we had assumed that scholars who had successfully published in top-tier journals in management or other disciplines would not be interested in submitting their work or serving as reviewers in our respective journals. Instead, we found many of these scholars to be keenly interested not only in submitting their work but also serving as reviewers. Surprisingly, it was the less-experienced, newly successful researchers who seemed to be more discerning rather than scholars with great depth and breadth of success in their scholarship. This may be caused, at least in part, by tenure requirements and journal lists.

Perhaps the one category of stakeholders from whom we learned the most were the reviewers. Each of us came to the job with several preconceptions about reviewers that were radically debunked. Overall, we had the impression that good reviewers are hard to find. Given the multidisciplinary nature of our journals, we found that reviewers in some disciplines were ready to serve and in other areas it took many invitations to finally obtain the necessary number of reviewers who were experts in that topic. At *FBR*, for the most frequently studied topics and methods employed, perhaps due to the explosive growth of interest in family business studies in

the past decade, there was an abundance of capable reviewers eager to deliver high-quality and timely reviews. While Dita went into the job expecting to have to coax or plead with strong scholars to review for *FBR*, quite unexpectedly she found a need to pay attention to ensure all members of the review boards were appropriately engaged in the journal.

We thought nice people would always be kind reviewers, but found out that some of the most brutal reviews came from the nicest people in the field. We had expected more experienced and successful scholars would do the best reviews, but would be hard to convince to review for our journals. While many (not all) seasoned scholars are good reviewers, most were not necessarily difficult to engage. In fact, some of the most senior researchers were the most pleasant and reliable reviewers with whom to work. Typically, not always though,⁴ it was junior researchers including doctoral students who did the best reviews, although nearly always recommending rejection. Perhaps, they still had the belief that there is such a thing as the perfect paper, while more experienced scholars realized that all papers have warts.

A comparison of qualitative reviewers with quantitative ones revealed interesting insights. While our preconceptions of this issue were varied, our experience was the same—as compared with quantitative reviewers, qualitative researchers are tougher on both qualitative and quantitative research. Two other observations related to reviewers that caught us by surprise are the following: first, how frequently the perspectives and recommendations of reviewers differed from each other; and second, the frequency with which the comments of the reviewers to the authors and to the editors were *not* fully aligned. As editors of journals drawing from multidisciplinary, diverse theoretical and empirical bases, we expected differences in reviewer perspectives. In fact, oftentimes, reviewers were selected because of their different perspectives and expertise. Reconciling such differences, while challenging, falls within the purview of editors. What we found more troubling, however, was when the same reviewer provided significantly different signals to the authors and to the editors. Inevitably, such contradictory comments made processing of manuscripts difficult, without really adding value to the review process. It was in instances such as these that we found ourselves with teaching moments, pointing the reviewer toward editorials on features of good reviewing.⁵

Finally, we learned that not all good authors are good reviewers or good editors. Though a threshold has to be crossed, these skills are quite distinct. But each can be improved with mindful practice over time. And, of course, on any given day those who normally are “good” at one or more of these skills may not be on another day. Perhaps, this shows we are human. But, at times, it does create problems in processing manuscripts.

Each of us tried different mechanisms to attract and retain the attention of strong reviewers. As rating of each review by the action editor became a norm with manuscript processing systems, it was easier to do annual reviews of the boards. Inevitably, the handful of board members who were frequently “unavailable” or “declined” when invited stood out visibly, as strong reviewing became a norm in our journals.

Decisions and subsequent author reactions were quite informative for us. In fact, it is the related interactions that contributed the most to our own growth as individuals. Each of us worried about the reactions of our coauthors, friends, and even members of our editorial teams when we shared a negative outcome with them. Surprisingly, it was not our closest colleagues who expected favors. Instead, at times, it was acquaintances who perceived some sort of an exchange norm prevailed. No such favored exchanges took place. Sending negative outcome letters remained difficult for us, though we were surprised how often authors whose work had been rejected sent notes of gratitude for the efforts of reviewers and guidance provided by the editors. Before taking on these jobs, we had assumed that big names get a break in the review process. While such implicit biases cannot be wholly ruled out, there is no evidence to suggest such breaks are provided. Instead, successful scholars count on reviewers to point out the issues in their work, and are more skilled in addressing the raised concerns in convincing ways.

“Boy, was I naïve” captures our overarching feeling on the editor’s job. Riding the wave of continuously increasing interest in entrepreneurship and family business studies, we used different means such as careful selection of editorial teams, special issues, conferences, best paper and reviewer awards, reviewer and paper development workshops, and so on, to stimulate interest while broadening the scope, rigor, relevance, and reach of our respective domains. For the most part, each of the three journals has done well and we expect a bright future under the stewardship of our respective successors, all of whom are exceptional scholars and seasoned editors.

A Peek Into the Future

In order to attempt to project the journals’ trajectory into the future, we must first step back to reflect on the path each journal is on. While the domain of entrepreneurship and family business studies has remained constant during our tenures as editors, its interpretation has varied for each of us and the journal we served. From its inception, *ET&P* has cast itself as the “big-tent” journal welcoming research using a wide variety of definitions and contexts of entrepreneurship research. Coming from the “small business” beginning created a need to remain open to this area and to embrace family business research. After the name change, there was a concerted effort to become more international in terms of staffing, among others.

JBV interpreted entrepreneurship as multifunctional, multidisciplinary, and multicontextual and therefore selected field editors that were experts in the different functions, disciplines, and contexts. Although there was to be some general notion of quality across all papers, the charge of the field editors was to apply the notion of research quality from the function, discipline, or context from which the paper was based and on which the editor was embedded. Dean was also conscious to not apply “his” definition of entrepreneurship but allow the authors to make the case—this helped avoid creating unnecessary boundaries that would constrain the journal and the field of entrepreneurship.

FBR was conceptualized as a journal focused on research at the interface of family and business systems, with a wide topical, contextual, disciplinary, and methodological scope. Guided by the mission of its parent association (FFI), *FBR* has sought to remain the anchoring journal of thought leadership and knowledge on family enterprises. It has welcomed research from a wide range of disciplines including accounting, anthropology, family studies, finance, marketing, psychology, sociology, and economics, among others. While family or transgenerational entrepreneurship, including innovation, are important topical foci for scholars in family business studies, the landscape of family business studies is quite broad. Yu, Lumpkin, Sorenson, and Brigham’s (2011) review of 257 empirical family business studies revealed 327 unique dependent/outcome variables of interest, indicating the breadth in scope of the field. While succession and governance have remained two of the most frequently researched phenomena of scholarly interest, topics such as philanthropy, internationalization,

social issues, advising, accounting, and marketing issues have generated enough literature to warrant special issues or review articles.⁶ A wide range of empirics have been used as signaled by review pieces and special issues focused on methods.

Interest in entrepreneurial issues in the context of family firms continues to grow, as is evident by the almost 50% of the papers presented in the Entrepreneurship Division of the 2017 Academy of Management conference being focused on family business research. What deserves a pause, perhaps, is that family business research was also presented in 13 of the 25 divisions of Academy of Management this year. Given family businesses are a dominant organizational form and the context of family business warrants research on different topics using varied methods and theoretical perspectives, this should not come as a surprise.

The challenge for scholars and journal editors in this explosive growth phase of interest in entrepreneurship and family business studies will be to carve a unique and meaningful scope for each journal. Given the growth of entrepreneurship and family business (more faculty lines, more journals, etc.), the question becomes how do these journals, which have historically been “niche” journals, grow to be full-fledged disciplinary journals. We think we are there, but that not all people are convinced that we are no longer a niche of management. Instead, management is only one of the functional areas that contribute to the fields of entrepreneurship and family business studies. Can we say it more strongly by all objective measures that these three journals have had a substantial impact on knowledge creation and dissemination and have arrived as elite journals. For example, in the most recent listing of Impact Factors released in summer of 2017, all three of these journals stood proudly among some of the most revered journals in management.⁷ We realize that it is tough to ask people to revisit their categorization of the journals (some categorizations systems have not been updated since 1990, e.g., UT Dallas list⁸) and that people have a lot invested in the status quo. We have chipped away at the status quo to achieve some level of updating, but we suspect that members of the entrepreneurship and family business communities are ready for a more full-throated call for change to reflect the new reality.

We are pleased to pass the reigns of our respective journals to three excellent scholars and thoughtful editors: Jeff McMullen (*JBV*), Tyge Payne (*FBR*), and

Johan Wiklund (*ET&P*). Each of us has had an opportunity to work closely with our successors for the past few years. So, in many respects, we share similar notions of scholarship in entrepreneurship and family business studies that will provide some continuity in each journal, keeping it on its positive trajectory. But we are also excited of the differences in our perspectives that will likely become apparent over time adding new energy to each journal, as new editorial teams are created and strategies for the journal’s future are envisioned and enacted.

It is our hope that this reflective piece helps shatter some of the preconceptions that those aspiring to be editors may have, provides some historical perspective, and sheds some light on the sometimes mysterious process, especially for those early in their careers. We are humbled and grateful for the trust you placed in each of us and sincerely hope we met your expectations. For the many opportunities to learn from and with you, thank you! As researchers and educators, the journey is the destination, as we embark on the next chapters of our professional lives.

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Notes

1. Karen Vinton, an emeritus professor at Montana State University, served in this role. Her past experiences as the co-President of FFI, an active family business advisor, and an avid reader of the Academy journals made her a great fit to lead *FBR*’s efforts to bridge the research–practice gap, a challenging task for all journal editors to manage in a professional field like business.
2. Of course, we were still doing our respective teaching, research, and institutional service, while trying to support our family lives. We are incredibly lucky to have the support of our respective universities and our amazing families.
3. Please see *FBR*’s editorials in the September 2016 and December 2016 issues for more on this topic.
4. For example, one of our friendly reviewers noted his/her very different experience than ours. For this action editor, with some exceptions, junior scholars gave papers a chance, whereas senior scholars (particularly

well-established ones) were much tougher and more likely to reject a manuscript. S/he wondered whether this was because senior scholars were busier with other service-related activities and rejects lead to less work, and they may have experienced the harsh reality of the review process to where they are less sympathetic and nurturing.

5. *FBR*'s editorials on this topic (and others) have aimed to consolidate literature from highly accomplished editors and journals. Excellent resources for authors, these editorials are available through the journal's page: http://journals.sagepub.com/topic/collections/fbr-1-resources_for_authors/fbr
6. Please see http://journals.sagepub.com/topic/collections/fbr-1-selected_review_articles/fbr for reviews on each of these topics.
7. Some examples of journals with 2016 Impact Factors ranging between 4.00 and 6.00: *Journal of International Business Studies* (5.869), *Journal of Business Venturing* (5.774), *Administrative Science Quarterly* (4.929), *Entrepreneurship Theory & Practice* (4.916), *Strategic Management Journal* (4.461), and *Family Business Review* (4.229).
8. <http://jindal.utdallas.edu/the-utd-top-100-business-school-research-rankings/index.php>

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Author Biographies

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