

Contexts Editor Proposal
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Sociological writing is a kind of storytelling—empirical and theoretically driven storytelling. Or at least it should be. As practiced, however, most sociologists (and academics generally) do not tell stories; they report data. That’s the bread and butter approach of most academics, and is required practice at most journals.

Contexts is different, which is why we both love Contexts. It is a place where sociologists, and some non-sociologists, can come to tell their (empirical and theoretically driven) stories in a clear, concise way free from the dulling constraints of typical journal data reporting. The writing is crisp, the stories are engaging, and the magazine appeals to the wider world of sociologists. While we may subscribe to the top journals in our field, do we read them at our leisure, or for pleasure? Doubtful. But we do that with Contexts.

Like all the Contexts editors who came before us, we firmly believe in the importance of the storytelling approach. And like all the previous editors, we have ideas on how we can improve an already excellent product.

Writing

The writing in Contexts is good; it can be even better. One of the main jobs of the Contexts editors has been to take good empirical data reporting and turn it into a well-written story. We will continue to do that, but it is exhausting and time consuming. A quicker road to good written content is to solicit good writers, something the last two editorial teams attempted to do. There are scores of sociologists who are good writers—many of whom have written for Contexts before. We will aggressively cultivate such writers to write feature articles and shorter pieces for the other departments. Another way to get good writers is to look outside the field. Ali has done this with the “Viewpoints” section. In every Viewpoints he’s edited, he solicited at least one non-sociologist, many of whom are not academics. We will do this with features as well, recruiting journalists, novelists and other professional writers to write for us. We will aim to give one feature over to these professional writers per issue, to bring great writing and new perspectives to current sociological topics.

Content

We will tweak some of the departments of Contexts. We like the Viewpoints section the current editors added. But we also feel sociology could do with more direct debate. To accomplish this, we will alternate Viewpoints every other issue with “Fighting Words,” a section where we facilitate a measured and spirited debate between two sociologists who disagree on a given topic—making the internal dialogue of sociologists accessible to our wider audience, and highlighting the broader implications of what might otherwise seem an arcane dispute.

We will also shift the focus of the book reviews. Currently the reviews have largely been sociological works reviewed by sociologists, with the last few being reviews of multiple books. This duplicates work in Contemporary Sociology. We will

revert back to the format under former editors Doug Hartmann and Christopher Uggen, where the reviews were either sociologists reviewing non-sociologists, or non-sociologists reviewing sociologists. The purpose of this is to broaden our reach of writers and stretch our reach of topics.

We will also change the back page to give high school and college students the opportunity to write short pieces of sociological relevance (something that also has been done before). An advantage of such an approach is again to build up our writing pool, but also to build up our readership, going vertical into the age groups. We will also add an occasional K-12 focus to the Pedagogies section, at times soliciting K-12 teachers as writers. Again, this can expand the number of writers and build our readership.

Outreach

The current editors have done an excellent job organizing panels at various sociological conferences on why and how people should write for Contexts (and do public sociological writing generally), which have been extremely well attended. We will take that a step further and have actual writing workshops at conferences. While this will obviously be a lot of work, the end goal is to train writers to come to us with pieces that require less attention to writing style, so we can concentrate more on developmental editing.

We will aggressively pursue expanding our writing and reading pool globally. We have very few writers coming from outside the US, and likely few readers. This is an international field and we do research internationally. Our writing pool and readership need to reflect this. We will reach out to international sociological organizations and prominent individuals in sociology departments in various countries (India, Japan, Brazil, France, etc.) to solicit writers and advertise the magazine. While the yield likely will be low, even a handful of international writers would be a great starting point and could also help build the readership.

Website

The Contexts website is little more than print matter digitized. It is understandable why the web is underutilized—it's a ton of work on top of the already stressful and heavy load of editing the magazine. But there are small things that can be done to enhance the website immediately. We will aim to add web-based sections, some of which can end up in print. For instance, we will introduce "Sociological Haikus". These will obviously be short pieces, and it won't be difficult to have numbers of them up. We will publish the best ones in the print edition. We will also look for ways to cultivate writing talents of graduate students, for whom short pieces for the website on the topics of the day will be productive outlets. At Maryland, Cohen will invite graduate students to work on web content and short pieces in an ongoing workshop format, similar to the writing for Contexts/public sociology seminars Hartmann and Uggen and Arlene Stein taught.

When talking of the website, we must discuss our web home, The Society Pages. They promote the magazine on their homepage and through their social media help produce Contexts podcasts at the magazine editors' suggestion and discretion. We and the ASA should do more to take advantage of Contexts' placement in the TSP webpage and to promote interaction. Currently there is no way to go back to TSP from the Contexts site. Backlinking to TSP, and having a

Contexts blog that is crosslinked on the TSP site would be beneficial to both Contexts and TSP. We can also recruit and link to popular blogs, like Philip Cohen's "Family Inequality," which can also be crosslinked with TSP. While TSP is an independent entity, it is our sociological friend, not a competitor. We will benefit greatly from increasing our interactions with them. Their homepage traffic is over a million page views a month. Their expertise and visibility can only be a boon for us.

Identity

Contexts has reached something of a crossroads. It is a very, very good sociological magazine. But who is it for? As it stands, it is a broad sociological magazine written largely by American sociologists for American sociologists. As good as that is, though, we want something more. We want this truly to be sociology's invitation to the general, intelligent public reader. The current editors are fond of saying Contexts writers should write for "Aunt Sally". Which they do. But Aunt Sally has to be able to get Contexts—both understand it, and be able to find it. If the ASA agrees that this is the goal, certain things need to be done. On our part we will broaden the pool of authors and make changes to the website to attract a wider readership. But the ASA must make changes as well if we are to expand the readership. If selected as editors, we expect a discussion about budget, distribution and price. Contexts is an official publication of the ASA, but it is not an academic journal, and must be treated differently from the other ASA journals. While we understand there are certain contractual obligations with Sage, we can all work creatively within these contractual parameters to improve the magazine. Otherwise, we cannot see how Contexts will ever be the public outreach publication it was intended to be. We understand this will represent a change in the orientation of the association toward Contexts, and won't be easily achieved. But working with the Publications Committee and ASA staff, we believe we can find a way to make it happen.

Institutional support

At the University of Maryland, Philip Cohen has secured a standard package of journal editorship support: office space, computers and phones, copying and shipping, course release, and graduate research assistance.

Long Island University on the other hand is an open-admission, poorly funded university, which cannot offer any of the things that Maryland has. But since Cohen has secured a promise of these resources, we are confident that our support needs are adequately met.

Co-editor background information

Both of us are the kind of public sociologists that Contexts needs as editors. We have records of writing and editing for broader audiences, in addition to scholarly publications. Our academic expertise and networks are distinct enough from each other that we cover a lot of intellectual and personal ground. We like each other and are excited about working together, something that will be key, as we will be working very closely for the next three years.

Syed Ali

I have been involved with Contexts for four years. I've written a feature article, book review, and have a forthcoming "Unplugged" article. After writing the first two pieces, I was invited to join the editorial board. The current editors asked

me to edit the Viewpoints section after seeing how I closely and critically reviewed submitted manuscripts.

To date, I have edited 35 articles in seven Viewpoints, with three issues remaining. While each article could conceivably be a feature, they are short (750 words). This forces the authors to be especially economical with their language. It also forces me to be demanding and push writers hard, but also massage egos. This is critical because I solicit them to write, and am in a way at their mercy. So I have to cajole them to put in a lot more time and effort than many of them had initially desired to put in for a non-peer-reviewed article. Some papers have to go through multiple revisions, which can be frustrating for such a short piece, and annoying for people not used to being edited. Some learn to enjoy it, though. One author recently told me “I must confess that I have never been so heavily edited and to my surprise, I’ve rather enjoyed it!” Another author praised me for having “sharp suggestions.”

Importantly for a prospective Contexts editor, I have written for general audiences. My first book on Dubai, published by Yale UP, was written as a trade book, and was widely reviewed in European dailies, the Times of India, and the New York Review of Books, among other places. My second book is a textbook on migration I am writing with former Contexts editor Doug Hartmann (Routledge, 2015). This book was conceived of as a very Contexts-like book—concise, jargon-free, and immensely readable. I have also published in non-academic forums, including two articles in the Guardian (UK).

Philip Cohen

I came to academia with a background in journalism as a columnist and editor at the Michigan Daily, and as a freelance writer. That taught me to appreciate good editing, how to write on a deadline, and how to get to the point. After serving on the editorial boards of American Sociological Review and Social Forces, and publishing my share of peer-reviewed journal articles, I branched out in my writing. I created the blog Family Inequality in 2009, and almost 600 posts later I am getting the hang of it. Between email subscriptions, Twitter and Facebook, the blog has about 3,000 followers who come from inside academia, from the news media, from sociology classrooms and the general public. I’ve since written for the Atlantic.com, Time.com, Sociological Images, Ms., and other websites.

The public work of blogging has led to TV, radio and online appearances, and brought a higher profile to my academic scholarship as well. During this time I have written an introductory textbook on sociology of the family, to be published by W.W. Norton next year. And I’ve been elected to the board of the Council on Contemporary Families, an organization dedicated to “providing the press and public with the latest research and best-practice findings about American families.” It’s our mission to bring real research to the public, to cut through the noise and obfuscation that dominates the ongoing debates over family issues.

Abbreviated vision statement

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Writing

As editors we will work to improve the writing by recruiting professional writers (journalists, novelists and other non-academics), and good sociological writers already well versed in writing for public audiences. We will also have writing workshops at sociology conferences to teach people the skill of how to write in a Contexts/public sociology manner. This is of course in addition to the work of developmental editing all Contexts editors engage in with regular submissions.

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