More Exploration and Less Exploitation: Cultivating Blockbuster Papers for MOR

Johann Peter Murmann, Deputy Editor

University of New South Wales, Australia

Let me invite you to travel in your mind to the year 2030. Imagine that you are one of the Senior Editors of MOR and have been asked by the Editor-in-Chief to write a short retrospective on the previous 15 years. Delighted to take on this task, you compose an editorial along these lines:

Dear MOR readers and contributors:

Thomson Reuters has just released its journal impact factor ranking for 2029. For the past five years, we have ranked in the top 15 out of 220 management journals, and last year, for the first time, we ranked fifth. This is a large improvement from 15 years ago, when we ranked at no. 33 out of 192 management journals. Even more positively, a recent poll by the Academy of Management, whose non-US membership has now exceeded 80% from a little over 50% in 2015, revealed that MOR has been found to be one of the top five journals that Academy of Management (AOM) members consistently read. In the qualitative section of the AOM survey, respondents offered comments such as:

- *'If you want to get a deep understanding of key management problems that transforming economies face, then MOR is by far your best source'.*
- *'I was never much interested in Africa, but after reading the article in MOR that documented a genuinely new organizational form in Kenya, I was inspired to partner with a scholar at University of Nairobi to develop potentially new theoretical insights by comparing alliance governance practices in Kenya and in Brazil'.*
- *'Many of the top management scholars first try to get their work published in MOR. The journal has developed a reputation for publishing the freshest ideas. I think this is in large part because in MOR management scholars have more consistently partnered with scholars from non-obvious fields, such as urban planning, public policy, public administration, cultural anthropology, environmental engineering, and development studies, which proved particularly useful to understand Chinese management challenges'.*

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- *'I follow MOR closely since there is always a good chance that I will come across an article that later turns out to be real blockbuster. This allows me to build on these creative articles before everyone else does'.*

These statements are compelling evidence that MOR has developed a strong reputation beyond the narrow Thomson Reuters impact factor score, which fluctuates more from year to year at MOR than at other journals because of MOR's long-standing strategy of cultivating blockbuster papers, rather than a continual series of incremental papers.

It would be foolish for us to think that MOR's success is simply due to having recruited more brilliant editors than those at other journals. Clearly, elements of luck are involved in why MOR has become so influential that have little to do with the skills of past editorial teams. MOR benefited greatly from the general trend in which the countries regarded as transforming economies in 2015 (e.g., China, Indonesia, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, the Philippines, Brazil, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Egypt) increased their share of the world economy much more rapidly than was predicted that year.

But we can also credit explicit strategies for MOR's success: first, Arie Lewin's (2014) push to broaden MOR from a China-focused journal to one focused on all transforming economies; second, a systematic push to motivate authors to write and submit papers that had the potential to push scholarship in a new direction; third, the development of an ethos that motivated editors and reviewers to go the extra mile to nurture creative papers even before they were submitted to the journal.

Looking to the future, our greatest challenge will be maintaining these strategies and not losing our cool when the impact factor drops for a year or two before another set of blockbuster papers raises it again. Today, let us celebrate what MOR has achieved over the past 15 years. Thanks are due to all the authors and editors who made this possible.

Now let us return to the here and now and discuss more explicitly some of the strategies that we have already put in place to increase the chances that MOR will become the home of blockbuster papers. Building on the themes of this imaginary 2030 editorial, I now want to articulate additional strategies that we should implement to attract more blockbuster papers.

To bring clarity to my discussion, it is useful to describe briefly what I mean by 'blockbuster' papers and how they differ from the average papers in most journals. A good example of a blockbuster paper is James March's (1991) 'Exploration and Exploitation in Organizational Learning', which appeared in volume 2 of *Organization Science* (founded by MOR Editor-in-Chief Arie Lewin). By July 2016, the paper had accumulated a total of 4,582 Web of Science citations, compared with the average *Organization Science* paper published between 1990 and 2016, which had a total of 38.63 citations. As you can see in Figure 1, March's (1991) paper received no citations the year after it appeared (1992), it is cited only a few times in the next three years, it received 100 citations per year more than a decade after its publication, and, more than two decades after it was published – and this makes it a blockbuster paper – its annual citation numbers continue to grow. The average paper in any management journal looks more like the paper published by Lind
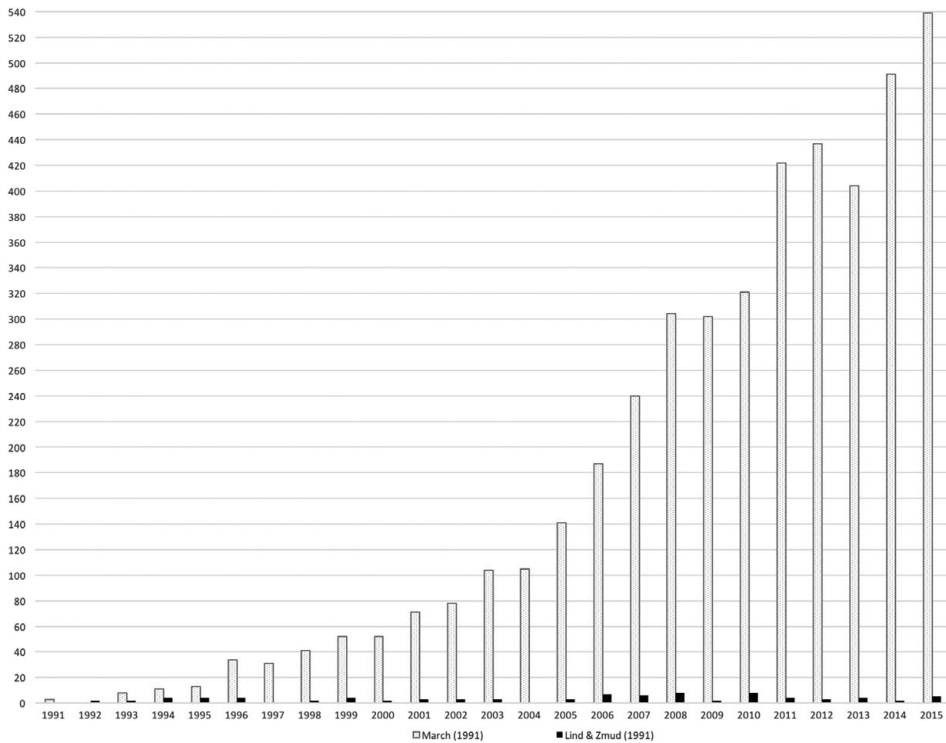
Figure 1. Annual citations of March (1991) vs. Lind and Zmud (1991)
Source: Web of Science.

and Zmud (1991), which was published in *Organization Science* the same year. The Lind and Zmud (1991) paper has received 87 citations: Citations of it grow, peak, and gradually decline (see Figure 1). How quickly the peak is reached depends a bit on the status of the journal. An analysis of management science journals, for instance, shows that the lower the status of the journal, the earlier peak is reached (see Mingers & Burrell 2006).

Comparing the total number of citations of March (1991) – 4,582 – and Lind and Zmud (1991) – 87 – it is clear that one blockbuster paper can make up for a lot of incremental papers. The number of citations for one blockbuster equals those for exactly 53 incremental ones.[1] Pause for a moment. Yes, this is a staggering number! Fifty-three is more than all the papers MOR published in 2015. This calculation makes it less difficult to see why MOR should try to increase the odds of becoming the home for a few blockbuster papers, rather than to trying to fill its pages with only incremental papers.

After reading the recent systematic study by Wang, Veugelers, and Stephan (2016) on the differential impact of explorative (more original and unique) versus exploitative (less novel and incremental) papers, I am even more persuaded that MOR needs to do everything possible to increase the chance that novel ideas make it through our review process. Their article, 'Bias against Novelty in Science:

A Cautionary Tale for Users of Bibliometric Indicators', follows a long tradition (Burt, 2004; Nelson & Winter, 1982; Usher 1954) of defining novelty in terms of 'the recombination of pre-existing knowledge components in an unprecedented fashion' (Wang et al., 2016: 2). More specifically, Wang, Veugelers, and Stephan (2016) examine the recombination of existing bodies of knowledge by treating individual academic journals as distinct bodies of knowledge. They operationalize the degree of novelty in a particular paper using two factors. First, they analyze the reference list in each paper and assess whether any two references to a pair of journals has ever been made in earlier publications and, for this reason, could be treated *as novel*. Second, they assess the distance between any two cited journals using the degrees of separation between the two journals before they are cited for the first time in the same article. Analyzing all 773,311 papers published in 2001 across all fields and indexed in the Web of Science, Wang, Veugelers, and Stephan (2016) arrive at a number of interesting findings. First, they find that papers with a high degree of novelty show larger variance in their citation distribution, which means these papers are more likely to find themselves in the tail of high impact but also in the tail of low impact. This corresponds with the intuition that novel papers are high risk. Such papers can become blockbusters but frequently have hardly any impact. Second, they find that, everything else being equal, over their lifetime highly novel papers accumulate 12.08% more citations than non-novel papers. Third, they reveal that novel papers start accumulating citations later than non-novel papers, which means that journal impact factors that assess only the first few years after publication are biased against novel papers (hence their paper title). Fourth, they calculate that the likelihood of being a blockbuster article is 39.82% higher for a highly novel paper than for a non-novel paper. These results generalize well my earlier conclusions from a comparison of the citation history of the March (1991) and Lind and Zmud (1991) papers.

As outlined in Arie Lewin's (2014) inaugural letter as Editor-in-Chief of MOR, we have already implemented a number of structural strategies to make it more likely that novel and potentially blockbuster papers will emerge at MOR.

1. A decentralized editorial structure that gives 32 Senior Editors complete autonomy in accepting papers. The idea behind this structural choice is that more different perspectives at the gatekeeping point of the journal will increase the likelihood that novel perspectives will make it through the review process.

2. A matching process that sends a paper to the Senior Editors and reviewers who may be most sympathetic to the paper.

3. An institutionalized invitation to write a perspectives article that expressly tries to give scholars the opportunity to 'share their "out-of-the box" audacious and innovative ideas' (Lewin, 2014: 3).

4. A new option of receiving preapproval for a study based on having articulated an interesting research question in conversation with the

theoretical literature and laying out a clear study design. If MOR preapproves the study, it will publish the study independently of whether it later turns out that the data does or does not support the original idea (Lewin et al. 2016).

5. A biannual Research Frontiers conference that functions as the exploration arm of the journal to give voice to 'bleeding-edge' issues. In its original articulation, the goal for the conference was to identify topics that could lead to special issues of the journal. But the idea quickly expanded, and the first output of the inaugural Frontiers conference, held at HKUST in December 2014, was a book that I edited with Arie Lewin and Martin Kenney (Lewin, Kenney, & Murmann 2016). It was published in 2016 by Cambridge University Press and Peking University Press under the title *China's Innovation Challenge: Overcoming the Middle Income Trap*. Consistent with the idea of exploring new areas for research, the book included a chapter by John Child on small and medium-size enterprises (SMEs), which provided the central theme for the second Frontier conference, held in October 2016 in Beijing and in January 2017 in Bangalore under the title 'The SME Ecology of Transforming Economies: Knowledge Creation, Entrepreneurship, Innovation and Economic Growth'. The idea for the conference is to provide ideas for future special issues of the journal and, more immediately, a book that can serve as the inspiration for a special issue of MOR that will take a few years to produce, from the initial call for papers to its publication.

I believe that we need to increase our efforts to build 'software' that can take full advantage of these structural feature of MOR to bring about blockbuster papers. By 'software' I mean a collective ethos and commitment to constantly seeking and experimenting with additional strategies to help promote novel and interesting work at MOR.

In the remainder of this editorial, I articulate strategies that focus on the stage before papers are submitted to MOR. Building on the strong tradition of helping authors bring out the best in their papers, which the founding editor Anne Tsui and her team cultivated over many years (and which is shared by Arie Lewin and the current editorial team), the present MOR structures are already very good at allowing novel and potentially blockbuster papers to make it through the review process. In my view, we need to focus additional strategies on helping such papers to be written in the first place. To put it another way, in addition to helping papers improve after they are submitted, we need to try to help scholars at the design stage of new research before a paper is written.

Before I show the promise of this strategy, I want to demonstrate that it is connected with a consistent theme in previous MOR editorials (Editorial Team, 2005; Tsui, 2006; Morris & Leung, 2010; Leung, 2012; Lewin, 2014; Meyer,

2015) and MOR articles. All of them laid out the promise of building a strong scholarly community around Chinese management studies (March, 2005; Barney & Zhang, 2009; Leung, 2009; Van de Ven & Jing, 2012) and, by implication, a community of scholars focused on transforming economies. By definition, a Universalist science of organizations must be interested in organizations in all their variations around the world. As transforming economies become an increasingly important part of the world economy, more scholarly attention will need to be concentrated on organization in these countries. A community of scholars devoted to transforming economies will likely make substantial new contributions to management knowledge by studying in detail the areas of the world that hitherto have been understudied. Furthermore, by studying novel contexts (e.g., transforming economies), it is possible to gain a deeper theoretical understanding of the boundary conditions of theories that were developed in the context of advanced economies and often more narrowly in the context of the United States. James March (2005: 14) beautifully wrote,

> *Studies in the Chinese context are also crucial to the identification and elaboration of context-free ideas. While conceding the overwhelming importance of context, most students of organizations aspire to a more general understanding of organizations, an appreciation of how contextual factors affecting organizations intersect with context-free sets of ideas about human behavior, institutions, history and society. … Every new context that is added clarifies the way context affects organization and thereby contributes to the identification and elaboration of more nearly context-free ideas.*

Klaus Meyer (2015) argued in these pages that the broadening of MOR beyond China to all transforming economies makes MOR even better placed to be the home for careful comparative research that can help to identify the scope of existing theoretical ideas by identifying its boundary conditions and to develop new ideas in which existing concepts simply cannot explain the core of the phenomenon observed. It is much more difficult, however, to assemble persuasive comparative studies that can serve this purpose if one studies one context and then hopes to find a similar study in the literature as a point of comparison. We should not fool ourselves: The likelihood of having a persuasive comparative study is much higher if comparative design is built into one's study from the beginning (see for example, Murmann, 2013).

I now offer three examples in which scholars helped other scholars to craft a better study design before the first word was written.

1. John Child, a frequent contributor to MOR, got involved in the early stage of a project on the perception of psychic distance instigated by Pushyarag Puthusserry. John helped to shape a design that was novel both in its mixed-methods approach and in exploring new aspects, such as coping strategies. It also had a comparative design exploring the perceptions of psychic distance by managers of both British and

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India SMEs who were engaged in partnerships. The paper was later published under the title 'Psychic Distance, Its Business Impact and Modes of Coping: A Study of British and Indian Partner SMEs' (Puthusserry, Child, & Rodrigues, 2014).

2. Anne Tsui invited Liangding Jia to visit her at Arizona State University. Liangding had won a grant from the National Science Foundation of China to study the relationship between job-level employment and employees' job-related attitudes and performance. He recalls that after he showed Anne his conceptual model and the proposed underlying mechanisms, Anne told him that the proposed study had too little novelty. Anne suggested that he redesign the study and proposed bringing Jason Shaw into their discussions. Over the next several months, Liangding went back to the literature and, with the help of Anne and Jason, designed a very different study, with a different dependent variable (now focused on team creativity) and different constructs and mechanisms. Only after a new conceptual model was agreed on and a new survey instrument of employees designed did the data collection at different Chinese firms commence. The study was eventually published under the title 'A Social-Structural Perspective on Employee-Organization Relationships and Team Creativity' (Jia et al., 2014).

3. In this final example, I helped to make the study more comparative before the first word of the paper was written. Kristie Seawright, a US-based scholar, contacted me to find out whether I was interested in facilitating a study on the role of shame in innovation and helping to collect data in Australia. The idea sounded interesting, so, I joined the effort along with my Chinese doctoral student Zhijing Zhu. It seemed to me, however, that the study would be even more promising if we also collected data in China. Zhijing then used an old university connection in China to organize conducting the same survey in China. Now, we can compare attitudes among different ethnic groups in the United States, Australia, and China. Adding the Chinese context to the study from the beginning makes the study much more promising because we have a chance to identify boundary conditions, as envisioned by March (2005) and Meyer (2015).

The purpose of the imaginary retrospective from 2030 at beginning of this editorial was to outline the prize that we stand to win if we facilitate the creation of blockbuster papers at MOR. All three examples described above have in common that they bring scholars from transforming economies together with scholars from advanced economies to conceptualize and carry out studies jointly, rather than recruiting a Western scholar to help frame and write up the study after the data has been already collected. My key argument is that MOR should invest even

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more effort than it has done already to bring together scholars from transforming economies and advanced economies at the design stage of new research projects. We should start a conversation about different mechanisms and forums that can help to make this happen. Please contact the editorial team with any other ideas on how we can make MOR the home for a growing number of blockbuster papers that advance our knowledge management and organizations.

NOTE

[1]   If one uses Google Scholar citations for both papers as a point of comparison, as of February 6, 2017, March (1991) has been cited 70 times more than Lind and Zmud (1991) (17,882 versus 251).

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