

• 学问人生 •

我从编辑《爱西斯》中学到的

What I Learned From Editing *Isis*

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摘要: 在纪念《自然辩证法通讯》创刊四十周年之际, 我想借此机会思考一下这份杂志的未来, 以及如何才能使它在中国的科学史研究领域继续保持顶级杂志的地位。基于我从2004年至2014年编辑《爱西斯》的经验, 我想提出所有杂志都始终会面临的几个基本问题, 并试图提出一些解决方案。问题如下: 1. 《自然辩证法通讯》杂志的预期目标是什么? 2. 编委会应该具有怎样的职能和组织形式? 3. 什么样的版式才能尽可能地吸引更多的新读者, 并且让现有的读者继续保持对杂志的兴趣? 也许, 我在担任《爱西斯》主编之初的一些经验将会给思考《自然辩证法通讯》的未来发展提供一些有益的帮助。

关键词: 爱西斯 自然辩证法通讯 编委会 杂志版式 科学史杂志

Abstract: The celebration of the 40th anniversary of the *Journal of Dialectics of Nature* might also be used as a time for reflection about the future of the journal and how it can continue to be the pre-eminent journal in the history of science in China for years to come. In this paper I use my experiences while editing *Isis* from 2004 to 2014 to raise three fundamental questions that all journals must ask from time to time, and discuss how we resolved some of them. The questions are: 1. What are your aspirations for the *Journal of Dialectics of Nature*? 2. What should the function and composition of the editorial board be? 3. What format would best draw in new readers and continue to keep the interest of the current readers? Perhaps my experiences at the beginning of my term as editor of *Isis* will provide some food for thought on the future of the *Journal of Dialectics of Nature*.

Key Words: *Isis*; *Journal of Dialectics of Nature*; Editorial Boards; Journal Formats; History of Science Journals
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When I took over the editorship of *Isis* in 2004 it was seen by many readers as being too staid. One challenge, then, was to come up with ideas on how to make it more exciting. We were still receiving a

lot of first-rate papers, but few of the distinguished scholars in the field were submitting their work to us. Although I thought a lot about what changes I wanted to make before I formally began as editor, I tried to

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*This paper is based on a presentation made at the editorial board meeting on September 23rd, 2018, at the University of the Chinese Academy of Sciences.

limit those changes during the first six months of my term. I used that time to consult with the members of the editorial board and with other scholars that I respected while at the same time mastering the current publication process. I didn't want to make too many modifications until after I knew the operation from top to bottom. As you celebrate the 40th anniversary of the *Journal of Dialectics of Nature*, you might use this time as a period for reflection about the future of the journal and how it can continue to be the pre-eminent journal in the field in China for years to come. Perhaps my experiences at the beginning of my term as editor of *Isis* will provide some food for thought.

Today I want to use my experiences while editing *Isis* to raise some fundamental questions that all journals must ask from time to time, and discuss how we resolved some of them. Our solutions, I hasten to add, may not be relevant or appropriate for the *Journal of Dialectics of Nature*. The issues that I will raise should be discussed by the editors and by members of the editorial board, with the editor in chief taking the lead. It is good to review current practices and policies occasionally, to see if a different way of running the journal will help to improve it. This keeps the journal fresh and it ensures that members of the editorial board continue to be engaged.

QUESTION 1: What Are Your Aspirations for the Journal?

In the case of *Isis* the answer seemed clear from the beginning when George Sarton first founded the journal in 1912. *Isis* has always aspired to be the premier journal in the history of science. The goal has been to be seen as the leading journal in the field—the journal that scholars from around the world will all want to read. This meant attracting the highest quality articles that dealt with topics of broad significance for all our readers. It also meant reviewing the most important new publications in the history of science in our book review section, including books in foreign languages. So for me, the aspiration for the journal was already set. My challenge was how to achieve this aspiration—to carry on the tradition of fulfilling the role of the leading journal in the field.

For the *Journal of Dialectics of Nature* this question may not be settled. Do you aspire to be the leading journal in the history of science in China, in Asia, or even beyond? And whatever your aspiration is, how will you achieve it? How you answer the question “What are your aspirations for the journal?” will very much determine how you respond to the remainder of the questions I will raise. But let me just make one point that is obviously key for dealing with this question, and that involves the issue of what language you publish your articles in. Currently you have a mix of Chinese and English, though Chinese is by far predominant. Do you want to continue this approach? If this approach is continued it limits your audience primarily to China.

QUESTION 2: What Should the Function and Composition of the Editorial Board Be?

When I began as editor of *Isis* we had approximately thirty members on the board. In terms of composition, already the attempt was to go beyond American scholars. I kept this approach, but I should mention that my successor, Floris Cohen, has tried to go even further in internationalizing the editorial board. Another consideration was gender. I tried to keep the gender composition close to fifty/fifty. Still another consideration was coverage of the major fields in history of science. This turned out to be very fluid, as the popularity of fields changed over time. For example, more and more articles on twentieth century American science were being submitted to the journal and I needed to have more editors who worked in that field as a result. Fewer articles on the pre-early modern field were coming in, so I needed fewer editors who were specialists in those areas. Each editor has a three-year term. Every year ten editors leave the board and ten new editors are added. I used that process to adjust the composition of the board. Having limited terms is a good idea. I could still appoint editors to a second three-year term, but I did not do that often. As a result, more scholars in the field become involved. So a fair bit of turnover is healthy.

I think you can already see some of the issues you

may want to discuss, such as the terms of the current editors, the country of origin, and the gender balance on the board. I noticed in the recent meeting of the Chinese Society for the History of Science that a quite a lot of young women attended. It would be beneficial to see how you could gradually include more women on the board in order to engage that group within the history of science community.

But there is also the issue of the function of the board. How is the board used? How much should they be involved in major policy decisions? Should they become more central in recruiting new manuscripts for the journal? In refereeing submitted manuscripts? One thing that I did that was effective was to encourage the members of the *Isis* editorial board to act as “spies” on behalf of the journal at conferences. I asked the editors to be on the lookout for new manuscripts that might come out of first-rate conference papers. I invited them to send the names of scholars who gave first-rate papers and I contacted them directly to invite them to submit their work. Or, the editor approached the individual at the conference and encouraged them to submit. This increased the number of submissions and the quality of those submissions.

I included the editorial board in many, if not all, major policy decisions. They were an excellent sounding board. I also made sure that one member of the board was a referee on each submission. Just a brief note on the peer review process—I learned it was important to be transparent about this process. I wrote an article for the History of Science Society newsletter detailing how we refereed submitted manuscripts. We had three referees for each MS and a double blind review process. The member of the editorial board was there to ensure high standards. Their familiarity with the journal meant that they knew what the bar was for acceptance.

QUESTION 3: What Format Would Best Draw In New Readers And Continue To Keep the Interest of the Current Readers?

Here I was faced with one of my largest challenges. As I said, *Isis* was widely perceived to be staid and predictable when I first took over. I had

to shake things up and experiment with the format. I had to figure out what would make the journal more exciting. I had to think about how to attract more senior scholars to the journal, for many were not engaged, and how to include younger scholars and those in the middle of their careers as well. I especially think it is key to draw in brilliant emerging scholars at the junior level since they are so important for the future of the entire field as well as the journal. I also wanted to make sure that those working in the ancient period were as attracted to the journal as those working on the modern period.

On the latter point, given the number of papers I was receiving on the pre-1800 period, which was declining, and the number on twentieth century history of science, which was increasing, I decided that I should normally have at least one article from the pre-1800 period in every issue, one 19th century, and one 20th century, so that there was something for everyone. However every single article had to have a breadth that made it interesting to all readers. That meant that every article began and ended, in the introduction and conclusion, spelling out the broader implications of their new insight for history of science as a whole. If the article is about the professionalization of science, or about the development of the laboratory, the author needed to connect what they had discovered about their particular period with the scholarship on this issue in other periods.

The other thing I did to deal with the question of format is think of a new feature for the journal that would tackle the most exciting new developments in the field. So I created the “Focus” sections. I included one in each issue. They were the length of a regular article, but they contained four to five short think pieces on the same topic. They weren’t the usual scholarly articles. They were more speculative—as I said, “think pieces,” where we didn’t worry as much about detailed footnoting. We wanted reflection and innovative thinking. Some of the Focus sections dealt with re-interpreting the anniversary of important scientific discoveries, such as the sections on Einstein’s 1905 papers on relativity or the publication of Darwin’s *Origin of Species* in 1859. Others explored the relationship between history of science

and cognate fields such as history of mathematics, history of medicine, history of the social sciences, science and literature, and so on. This allowed me to draw in scholars working in these others fields that weren't historians of science. Then there were Focus sections on fields within the history of science that seemed to be gaining momentum, for example the study of Chinese history of science and new research on the history of science in modern India. I made sure that the Focus sections included young as well as senior scholars. This is how I brought many of the senior scholars in the field back to the journal. I recruited Peter Galison and Lorraine Daston for two of the early Focus sections.

For me, creating the Focus sections helped me to make *Isis* into a publication that both reflected the field and shaped it. By publishing the best articles submitted to the journal for consideration I was reflecting what was going on in the field. But by including one Focus section per issue I was also shaping the field. By detecting and anticipating new trends in the field I could speed up their development by drawing attention to them. It is important to point out that I didn't come up with the ideas for Focus sections on my own. I invited readers to submit informal proposals; I encouraged members of the editorial board to come up with ideas for them; and I sometimes took my cue from exciting conference sessions that I, or members of the board, had attended.

For the *Journal of Dialectics of Nature* you might want to discuss the current format to see if you are satisfied with it. I see that there are already symposia. Do they include traditional papers or thought pieces? For *Isis* we never considered having issues devoted to one theme. Our sister journal, *Osiris*, does that. But perhaps that could be considered for the *Journal of*

Dialectics of Nature. It would involve appointing a guest editor or editors to organize the theme issue but they would need to be selected carefully.

One more point that might be worth considering, and that is the physical appearance of the journal. I have noticed that there are few illustrations. When I took over *Isis* the journal already contained a fair number of illustrations. I made a decision to try to include more as it made the journal more physically appealing and it was in line with the increasing interest in the visual culture of science. Illustrations can be used to provide additional evidence for what is being argued in an article. I didn't include them just to make the journal more aesthetically attractive. I insisted that each article include at least three or more illustrations, and of various kinds, whether it be photographs of scientists, diagrams from science books and papers, or even paintings that were relevant. I also tried to have a vivid illustration on the front cover of the journal.

Editing a history of science journal is one of the most fulfilling things I've done over the course of my career. It is intellectually rewarding, it allows you to have your finger on the pulse of the field, and it brings you into contact with some of the most dynamic minds in the history of science. It also has provided me with interesting opportunities after I completed my term as editor. If I hadn't edited *Isis*, I wouldn't have had the opportunity to be here with you to discuss your important journal. Based on what I've seen at this meeting, I see a glorious future ahead for the *Journal of Dialectics of Nature*. You have a gifted and committed editorial team, devoted members of the editorial board, and a passion for the history of science that will serve you well over the next forty years of the journal's life.

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