

The Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory:

Origins and Early Development

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The editors of this volume, Stuart Bretschneider, Carolyn Heinrich, Beryl Radin, and Craig Thomas, asked me to write an introduction. They suggested that readers might find the origins and early development of the *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* of interest and that a recounting of *JPART's* beginnings would serve historical purposes. So this introduction is primarily the *JPART* story told by someone who was there.

A wise person once wrote that ninety percent of originality is bad memory. New or fresh ideas we believe to be original are very likely to trace to things we have earlier seen, read, or experienced and to be based on some mixing together of things we in earlier times have come to know. So it was with the *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*. What follows are snippets of memory, recollections of conversations and experiences, and my own evolved and still evolving understanding of public administration as a field of professional practice and as an academic subject, all mixed together as my best attempt to describe the origins and early development of *JPART*.

After graduate school it was my very good fortune to join the faculty of public administration at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs of Syracuse University. Among my colleagues at the Maxwell School were Dwight Waldo, who had

just become editor-in-chief of the *Public Administration Review*, and Frank Marini, who served as the managing editor of *PAR*. It is important to remember that at that time academic public administration was a one journal field and that journal was *PAR*. At that time most public administration academics were political scientists, and many of us routinely read and contributed to the several political science journals. Indeed, at that time Waldo, Marini, and all the rest of the Maxwell public administration faculty were in fact members of the political science department. What is now the department of public administration had not yet been established nor had the Syracuse University doctor of public administration degree.

One of the collegial rituals at the time, the late 1960's, was casual lunch together in Marshall Street, a seedy strip near campus with some good lunch places. When Waldo was present at lunch it was not uncommon for the topic of conversation to be *PAR*. Ordinarily I pressed the point that the best political science journals were increasingly empirical and theoretical (as against philosophical) and that *PAR* should do likewise. Waldo argued that what the political science journals published probably generally represented the political science discipline. His point was that the articles published in *PAR* probably reflected the range of primary interests of public administration scholarship at the time. He would then sometimes utter one of my favorite Waldoisms: "A journal cannot publish manuscripts it does not receive."

Not long after one of these lunches Waldo asked me to take a position on the *PAR* editorial staff, suggesting the title research editor. He empowered me to make publishing commitments to academics on behalf of *PAR*. He reasoned that *PAR*'s research bona fides could be strengthened by commissioning research manuscripts from the leading

research and theory academics in the field. We then together drew up a list of academics to contact and to commission to present their research and theory in *PAR*. This gesture served to indicate that Waldo had been listening to his junior colleagues all along. It was also a lesson on finding the balance point between the role of a leading journal to reflect the best work being done in the field and the responsibility of a journal to help shape or guide a field in a particular direction. Waldo also cautioned me in working with these authors to not let the manuscripts become methodological tracts. Because I had read the Waldo/Simon debate while in graduate school I knew what he meant.

A second common topic at the Marshall Street lunches was the American Society for Public Administration and particularly ASPA politics and policies regarding *PAR*, which is owned by ASPA. Unlike disciplinary journals such as the *American Political Science Review*, sponsored by the American Political Science Association, which is made up almost entirely of academic political scientists, ASPA membership is, and always has been, comprised of a fairly even mix of academics and professional public administrators. From its beginnings, it has been understood that, unlike a typical academic discipline, public administration is a professional field of application with a supporting body of scholarly literature, a literature that is both scholarly and applied. It was both assumed and expected, therefore, that scholarly work in public administration was to be relevant to the practice of public administration and should contribute to improving that practice. This perspective was part of the ASPA ethos and was manifest in several ways in *PAR*. For example, the section of *PAR* called “From the Professional Stream” dates at least from the time of Waldo’s editorship, and perhaps from before that. For many years *PAR* Editors-in-Chief commissioned leading voices from public administration practice to

write articles for *PAR*. There is an annual award for the best *PAR* article by a practitioner, the Louis Brownlow Award. And, most important, the review of manuscripts submitted to *PAR* for consideration assume that manuscripts were to be evaluated at least in part on the basis of the evaluator's assessment of the extent to which the manuscript was readable by practitioners, was relevant to practice, and contributed to the betterment of public administration practices.

Dwight often recounted to us the complaints he received about *PAR*, most of them from practitioners, and most of them to the effect that the latest issue had nothing in it that could be applied to a particular agency at a particular time. To the best of my recollection, the most common phrase used in this category of complaint was approximately this: interesting in theory but the author does not indicate how it could be applied in my agency. I doubt if this idea would work in practice.

On occasion at these lunches we wondered aloud whether public administration as a field either could have or should have an avowedly academic and scholarly journal, a journal like the leading journals in each of the social sciences. Was it feasible? And even if it was feasible, would such a journal contribute to strengthening public administration as a body of knowledge and a field of practice? Even then I tended to be a voice on the side of the need for such a journal. At the time I was influenced by the group at Cornell that had developed the *Administrative Science Quarterly*. *ASQ* was to the field of business administration an unapologetically academic and theoretical journal. Its standards of manuscript acceptance were very high and its production values were far better than anything else I had seen in the social sciences. Dwight too was impressed by *ASQ*. We agreed, however, that it was far easier to build *ASQ* in a good school of

business than to attempt to build something like *ASQ* in the context of a professional association of mixed company, like ASPA.

On looking back it is clear to me that those early experiences with Dwight Waldo were formative in the later development of *JPART*. One brief addendum before leaving this part of the story. Many years later I had several detailed conversations with Dwight as *JPART* was being developed and we recalled together those Marshall Street lunches. He read the first issues and, as usual, was kind and encouraging.

By the late 1970s I had moved professionally in the direction of university administration. However, in 1977 I served as the president of ASPA. What is now the *Public Administration Times* was established at that time. Part of the rationale for establishing the *PAT* was for a monthly tabloid size newsletter to serve, at least in part, as an outlet for some of the more applied work in public administration and, by implication, to free up *PAR* to be more theoretical and research oriented. To some extent that idea worked. *PAR* is without doubt now more research oriented and theoretical than it was before the emergence of *PAT*, and *PAT* is filled with “best practices” and other forms of applied public administration. But *PAR*, with a long list of subscribing libraries, has long been a significant profit center for ASPA. *PAT*, on the other hand, is one of APSA’s more significant expenses—witness the recent decision to move six of the twelve annual issues of *PAT* to the “on line” format, thus saving the costs of printing, mailing, and so forth.

In the mid-1980s, after too many years in administration, I began to cast about for research and teaching opportunities in public administration, and it was my very good fortune to find a wonderful opportunity at the University of Kansas. To get back up to

speed in the field I immersed myself in our journals. It was not long before I realized that the world of public administration journals had not changed as much as I had thought. *PAR* was bigger and coming more often but still seemed to be trying to find a balanced point between academics and practitioners and a balancing point in the coverage of theory and practice. I gradually became convinced that the field needed at least one avowedly, unapologetically theoretical and empirical journal. So I began talking to friends and colleagues about the development of such a journal. Not only was the response mostly positive, it was reinforcing. The more I talked to others about the idea, listened to their responses and perspectives, the more I persuaded myself that it was the right thing to do. Conversations about a possible new public administration journal emphasizing research and theory often turned into instrumental conversations about how to make it happen.

At that point it was assumed that a new journal would need two things—some venture capital and an organizational base or sponsor.

The National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration was approached in order to gauge their possible interest. The deans and directors were not interested and, as it turned out they were rather risk averse. Having once been one of them, I understood and moved on.

Next the Section on Public Administration of the American Political Science Association was approached and their response was distinctly negative, mostly because of agreement among the members present that the field already had too many journals.

Finally a consortium of participating university public administration programs agreed to sponsor the new journal and to each contribute both faculty time to editorial

duties and a small amount of cash to assist in a journal start-up. The initial participants were the Maxwell School, Syracuse University; the School of Public Administration of the University of Southern California, the Public Administration Department of the University of Kansas; and, The School of International and Public Affairs of Pittsburgh University. Pitt withdrew after one year, to be replaced by the School of Public and Environmental Affairs of Indiana University. Each program agreed to contribute \$4,000 the first year, \$3,000 the second year, and so forth, for four years. The business plan called for the new journal to be self-supporting based on institutional (library) subscriptions, at the end of four years.

In addition a new section of ASPA, the Section on Public Administration Research, was created as a vehicle for individual subscriptions. The sole purpose of the section was to sponsor the journal.

Although there was general agreement among the principals regarding the emphasis on research and theory, there was, nevertheless, the matter of what to call the journal. At the time the phrase “public management” was in fashion, and some preferred that phrase to public administration. There were those who believed that there were important differences between public administration—thought to be old fashioned, traditional, and an artifact of progressive era reforms—and public management, associated with the “new public management” and the modern era of efficiency and performance reforms. Some were of the view that public management was the un-public administration, a critique of traditional public administration, and that an un-public administration message should be associated with the journal. Others, including myself, were of the view that public administration had a rich research and theory history, and

that those who favored the phrase public management had yet to make the case as to why that would be an advance on public administration. It was decided in the end that it would be best for the journal to be as direct and explicit about its scope and purposes as possible, and that the field should not turn away from its Hamiltonian, Madisonian, Wilsonian, and Weberian roots. So it was the *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, rather than a title with an un-public administration message or subtext. This matter would be revisited later when what is now the Public Management Research Association was established by many of the same principals.

A start date was established, an editorial team was assembled, and the new journal was announced. Some of the early articles were commissioned, but a fairly steady stream of unsolicited manuscripts appeared surprisingly soon. It turns out that Lawrence, Kansas, is not only the home of the University of Kansas; it is also the headquarters of one of the largest publishers of academic journals in the world, the Allen Press. My wife, Mary, edited each of the manuscripts. We acquired the services of a professional “page maker” a person experienced with desktop publishing. I gave her a recent issue of the *Administrative Science Quarterly* and asked her to use the same format for *JPART*. Those familiar with *ASQ* will immediately recognize the generous margins and the footnotes in the right or left page margins rather than at the bottom of the page. Once each issue was assembled in printable form it was taken, with a mailing list, to Allen Press. The issues were then printed and bound and mailed to subscribers. We chose a simple cover with just the name of the journal and the year and volume number in bold colors and instructed Allen Press to use first quality paper and cover stock. This detail is

included here to make the point that we were determined to make *JPART* the best written and the highest quality journal in the social sciences.

In the early years we ordered a much larger print run than the number of subscribers would warrant. The idea was to use the extra copies as a marketing tool. The primary push for subscribers was with university libraries. Many leading public administration scholars went out of their way to contact their university libraries, urging subscription. We kept a running total of institutional subscribers and were able depending on maintaining a certain rate of new institutional subscribers to estimate the point at which the journal would be self-supporting, so long as we carefully controlled all direct costs. During this period the level of in-kind journal support in the form of the time of professors, mailing costs, attending meetings representing *JPART*, and so forth, was remarkable. The first issue of *JPART* was published in January, 1990. By January, 1994, the journal was breaking even.

In the early 1990s two important new developments were approximately coincident with the emergence of *JPART*: first was the coming of the world-wide web and modern digital communication technology, a subject to which I shall return in a moment; second was the coming of journal comparisons and rankings.

When the Canadian company Thompson Scientific, now Thompson Reuters, adapted the logic of publication abstracts and indexes, traditionally used by scholars to stay abreast of their rapidly changing literatures, to a logic of exclusivity and comparison, the world of academic journal publishing shifted on its axis. In the social sciences the Social Science Citation Index (SSCI), a Thompson property, established itself as exclusive, limiting membership to a select few journals (the same was done in the life

sciences, engineering, etc.). Within the social sciences there were the obvious discipline categories such as political science, economics, and sociology. And there were the fields of social science application such as planning, social work, public affairs. Once these categories were established an initial list of journals was included in each category and criteria were established whereby other journals could be added. The net result of this development was to establish an exclusive group of SSCI journals, leaving the journals not included to apply if they wish. It was not long before it was generally assumed that the best journals were in SSCI, a kind of Journal House of Lords, with all the rest in a Journal House of Commons, a kind of journal oblivion. It was not long before systems of faculty promotion and tenure began to evaluate candidates on the basis of the number of their publications in SSCI journals. And, it was not long before Thompson devised a system by which publications in the Journal House of Lords could be compared and ranked, the citation impact factor (how often an article is cited in another publication). A journal in, for example, the public affairs group of the SSCI, with the highest citation impact factor, is, therefore, described as the “best” journal in the field.

As one would expect, such ranking systems favor the well and long established, in this case the original journals in each field. Because *JPART* was new, it was not originally included in SSCI. In the mid-1990s, as soon as SSCI criteria permitted, *JPART* applied and was accepted in 1998. This point is important because other journals have been waiting for inclusion for a much longer period. In the first year *JPART* was ranked fourteenth; it was ranked seventh in the second year. This was thought at the time to be impressive for a very new journal. In the third year it was ranked first, and it has remained either first or second ever since.

JPART, like it or not, is situated in a kind of academic market in which publications compete and in which quality, and quality's substitutes, status and prestige, are the coins of the realm. The worry, in such a market, is a problem we all recognize: markets do not regulate themselves well, and there is not an invisible hand. We hear talk of "gaming the system," of journal tactics designed to improve rankings.

The coming of the worldwide web and digital communication technology has had a profound influence on all of scholarly publication including academic journals. Libraries, the institutional subscribers that support most academic journals, are now tightly controlling their purchase and storage of print versions of journals, in order to reduce costs. This is made possible through sundry systems of digital computer and internet based journal access, storage, and reading. For example, it is now almost certainly the case that more subscribers are reading *JPART* on line than in print. And, it is also almost certainly the case that many more non-North Americans are reading *JPART* than are North Americans. It is worth noting here that this collection of articles from *JPART* is digital, which makes the point rather firmly.

In 2001 *JPART* contracted with Oxford University Press (OUP) to be its publisher. OUP is an international leader in the transition to digital publishing.

The sequence of Public Management Research Conferences has been approximately parallel in time with the development of *JPART* and is an important part of the story. The Public Management Research Conferences and *JPART* served as the foundation upon which the Public Management Research Association was built. (A history of the development of the conferences and the evolution of those conferences into PMRA and the link with *JPART* can be found at the PMRA website under the February,

2006 issue of *Management Matters*.) Now, as it is sometimes put, in PMRA, public administration research scholars have a home and a journal of their own.

Finally, *JPART* has greatly benefited from excellent editorial leadership, with managing editors, Richard Meyer, Stuart Bretschneider, Beryl Radin, Carolyn Heinrich and now Craig Thompson. Dozens of leading scholars have served on the board of editors and have served as manuscript evaluators. Most important, however, has been the willingness of all of those engaged in public administration research and theory building to trust their work to *JPART*. If *JPART* makes one point it would be that there is very good research and theory building in public administration. *JPART* may not have changed the field, but it does reflect back to the field its own good work.