

Reflections on the Journal of Cooperatives 1986-2003

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Abstract

The Journal of Cooperatives (formally titled the Journal of Agricultural Cooperation) was published as a print journal from 1986 to 2003. The journal resumed publication as an electronic journal in 2007. This article provides a short history of the journal, analyzes trends in authorship, institution, content, research method and intended audience. Issues relating to electronic publication are also discussed. The journal's historical and current mission statement are also discussed and a future thrust for the journal is presented.

Key Words: Cooperative, academic journal, electronic publishing

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Reflections on the Journal of Cooperatives 1986-2003

The purpose of this paper is to provide a reflective look at the *Journal of Cooperatives (JOC)*, which is formally titled *Journal of Agricultural Cooperation*. The JOC was created, and arguably, has survived to serve a specific niche market of scholarly communication. While the JOC by no means holds a monopoly on scholarly publications related to the cooperative business model, it holds a position as the sole U.S. based academic journal focused on this area. Because it originated with an explicit specialization, the JOC has been spared the identity crisis of some academic journals, which periodically seek to define or refine their market niche. Still, as the journal goes forward, albeit with a slightly revised format, examining the past products of the journal and pondering future directions for the journal and for cooperatively -related research is appropriate.

Brief History of the Journal

The origins of the JOC can be traced to a proposal presented by Roger Ginder, (Iowa State University) in January 1985 to the American Institute of Cooperation. The American Institute of Cooperation was organized as cooperative and operated as 501-C3 entity focused on educational activities including youth education and the National Institute of Cooperative Education (NICE) conference. The AIC also published an annual year book “Agricultural Cooperation” that was widely distributed. The AIC membership included all of the major regional agricultural cooperatives as well as farm credit system entities.

The AIC governing board included two land-grant university representatives. Roger Ginder was serving in this capacity and was vice president of the AIC governing

board when he presented “Proposal for a Journal on Cooperation or a Refereed Section in the AIC Year Book” The state purpose of the proposed journal was to (1) encourage basic and applied research on issues of importance to cooperatives and their members, (2) provide a marketplace for the exchange of cooperative research results among academics, cooperative leadership and membership and (3) provide a means of rigorous review of thought and writings on cooperative topics.

The Journal of Agricultural Cooperative (JAC) was established in 1986 with technical editing and other in-kind support from AIC. The NC-140 regional research committee on cooperatives was also established in the spring of 1986, establishing a continuing linkage with the journal. AIC continued to publish the journal until its demise in 1991 when. The National Council of Farmer Cooperatives took over publication of the journal in 1991 and continued until 2003, the last volume as a print publication. The JOC resumed publication in 2007 as an electronic journal sponsored by the NCERA-194 Regional Research Committee on Cooperatives.

Jeffrey Royer served as the initial editor of the JAC. James Baarda, Bruce Anderson, Joseph Coffey, Charles Cramer, Roger Ginder, Del Helgeson and James Rhodes served on the editorial board. Emerson Babb assumed the role of editor in 1989 and served until 1991 when he was replaced by James Rhodes who served until 1994. Lee Schrader was editor during the 1995-1997 period and John Dunn served from 1998 to 2003. The JAC was renamed the Journal of Cooperatives in 1995.

The first volume of the JAC was published in 1986 and contained seven articles. This initial set of articles spanned a wide range of topics including producer contracts, credit scoring, patronage credits, international marketing, voting systems, and member

expulsion. The inaugural issue also included an invited discussion article from Harold Briemyer, an eminent cooperative scholar. The scholarly work presented in JAC's first volume included quantitative analysis, conceptual framework, and discussion articles. While the categorization of scholarly work is always somewhat subjective, most readers would classify the initial articles as applied rather than theoretical. Authors of the initial articles include agricultural economists, an industry practitioner (Federal Credit System), a rural sociologist, and an attorney. Two of the articles have an international focus.

Analysis of the JOC Contributions

This brief overview of the inaugural issue sets the stage for an analysis of what types of article the journal (here after referred to as the JOC) has published, who has authored the articles, and how the mix of articles has changed. The analysis is based on the 101 articles published between the journal's inception in 1986 and the last print edition in 2003.

Various criteria have been used in the literature to classify the output of economic journals. Johnson suggests three categories of research: disciplinary, subject matter, and problem solving. Debertin and Pagoulatos examine how the ratio of quantitative to non-quantitative articles published in the AJAE has changed over time. Robinson and Colyer use a wide range of criteria to examine the relevance and changes of the RAE. A number of studies have provided more cursory analysis of journal output. Oursbourn, Hardin, and Lacewell, Holland and Redman, Redman, Nielson and Riley, Opaluch and Just, and others have categorized the authorship, institutional affiliation and subject matter of articles published in selected Agricultural Economics journals.

A similar strategy of categorizations is used to analyze past contributions to the JOC. The journal output is categorized according to cooperative sector, membership type, subject matter, research method, author rank, author institutional affiliation, author discipline, and focus (U.S. versus international). The articles are also classified to show whether they relate more directly to traditional cooperatives or to evolving forms of user-owned businesses. Each article is assigned a primary and a secondary ranking for each criterion. Judgment about the appropriate primary and secondary category is made on the basis of the article title and a cursory reading by two reviewers. The process of classifying articles is inherently subjective. However, taken as a whole, the process provides insights into the evolution of the journal.

Cooperative sector classifications include marketing, supply, service, and manufacturing/value-added. Subject categories include management, marketing, membership benefits and governance, equity/ownership systems, financial performance, and property rights/legal issues. The research categories include survey/primary data, quantitative analysis/secondary data, theory/conceptual framework/discussion, and case study. Four categories, (professor/associate professor, assistant professor, graduate student, industry participant and other), are used to reflect the rank of an author. Author discipline and institutional affiliation are based on biographic information for all of the authors and co-authors which was listed on the title page. Finally, the categorization into U.S. versus international is based on the major focus and/or data source of the manuscript. The number of articles that could be classified under each criterion is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Number of JOC Articles 1986-2003 That Could Be Classified by Specific Criteria

	Total Articles	Authors	Subject	Coop. Function	Coop. Member.	Research Method	Audience
All years	117	205	112	94	97	123	108
1986 to 1991	43	75	41	36	41	43	43
1992 to1996	38	65	38	27	32	37	34
1997 to 2003	36	65	33	31	24	43	31

Who Publishes in the JOC?

Associate and full professors appear as first authors on 46% of the JOC articles while assistant professors account for 23% and graduate student represent 5% (Table 2). The catch all “other category” represents 26% of the first authors. This category includes first authors who are simply listed “Agricultural Economist” or “Rural Sociologist” and authors listed as director of cooperative research center, instructor, lecturer, post-graduate researcher, or government or industry affiliation. Cooperative industry participants are listed as first authors on two articles. The distribution by overall authorship is similar. Graduate students make up a larger share of the overall authorship category reflecting the fact that they are more commonly listed as junior authors. No apparent trend in the authorship categories is apparent.

Table 2. Authorship Categories of JOC Articles 1986 to 2003

	Professor/Associate	Assistant Prof.	Graduate Student	Other*
Overall authorship (all years)	46%	18%	11%	25%
First author (all years)	47%	22%	4%	28%
First author 1986 to 1991	51%	23%	0%	26%
First author 1992 to 1996	49%	19%	8%	24%
First author 1997 to 2003	39%	22%	6%	33%

*includes industry participant, USDA, instructor, lecturer, post graduate researcher, director of cooperative research center and authors without rank information

A summary of the institutional affiliation of authors and co-authors is provided in Table 3. Authors from forty two separate US universities, seven universities located outside the US, two cooperative firms, one non-cooperative firm, one farm organization, and the USDA are listed on the JOC 1986-2003 contributions. The USDA has the highest incident of authorship, being listed on 15 articles followed by the University of Minnesota and the University of Nebraska with eight articles each. JOC contributions include authors and co-authors from five countries and the U.S.. Fourteen percent of the articles include an author with a discipline other than agricultural economics (Table 4). In addition to rural sociology and agricultural law, the disciplines listed include accounting, business, ecology, management and quantitative methods, statistics, and sociology. The percentage of JOC articles with non-agricultural economist authorship is higher in the more recent time period.

Table 3. Institutional Categories of JOC Articles 1986 to 2003

	US University	Non-US University	USDA	Industry
All years	75%	9%	12%	4%
1986 to 1991	80%	4%	14%	2%
1992 to 1996	77%	13%	4%	6%
1997 to 2003	69%	12%	16%	4%

Table 4. Contributions to the JOC by Disciplines Other Than Agricultural Economics

All years	14%
1986 to 1991	12%
1992 to 1996	8%
1997 to 2003	22%

Subject Categories

Subject classifications of JOC contributions are summarized in Table 5.

Management and financial performance are the most popular subject categories and represent 75% of total contributions. The category of equity systems, arguably one of the most unique aspects of cooperative businesses, accounts for only 4%. Articles dealing with membership benefits and governance issues (topics also somewhat unique to cooperative businesses) accounted for 16% of the published articles.

Table 5. Subject Classifications of JOC Articles 1986-2003

	Mang.	Mrkt.	Member Benefits/ Governance	Equity Systems	Financial Perform.	Property Rights/ Legal	Not Classified
All years	41%	4%	16%	4%	27%	3%	4%
1986 to 1991	30%	12%	19%	9%	21%	5%	5%
1992 to 1996	37%	0%	21%	3%	37%	3%	0%
1997 to 2003	58%	0%	8%	0%	25%	0%	8%

Cooperative Function

Introductory cooperative classes often classify agricultural cooperatives into marketing, supply, service, and manufacturing/value-added. JOC articles are analyzed to determine the type of cooperative emphasized in the article. A summary of the functional categorization is provided in Table 6. Sixty percent of the JOC contributions that could be categorized by cooperative type focus on marketing cooperatives. Farm supply cooperatives receive the next most frequent focus with service cooperatives and manufacturing/value-added cooperatives receiving roughly equal treatment.

Table 6. Primary Functional Category of Cooperatives Referred to in JOC Articles 1986-2003*

	Marketing	Supply	Service	Manufacturing/ Value-Added	Not Classified
All years	50%	15%	8%	8%	20%
1986 to1991	44%	19%	9%	12%	16%
1992 to1996	61%	5%	3%	3%	29%
1997 to 2003	47%	19%	11%	8%	14%

Cooperative Membership

Cooperatives are also often classified on the basis of membership. A summary of the membership categorization is provided in Table 7. Eighty percent of the contributions in the JOC relate most directly to farmer-owned cooperatives. The publication of articles relating to “cooperatives in communities”, “non-agricultural cooperatives”, “rural hospital cooperatives,” and “machinery and labor sharing arrangements” demonstrates that the journal is not attempting to limit itself to the discussion of traditional farmer-owned cooperatives.

Table 7. Primary Membership Category of Cooperatives Referred to in JOC Articles 1986-2003*

	Farmer	Consumer	Worker	Not Classified
All years	80%	2%	1%	17%
1986 to 1991	95%	0%	0%	5%
1992 to 1996	82%	3%	0%	16%
1997 to 2003	61%	3%	3%	33%

Research Method

The type of research published, and not published, in academic journals has been a topic of frequent debate. For example, Robinson and Coyler determined that 95% of the RAE articles published between 1991 and 1993 had a quantitative focus as compared to 84% of the AJAE articles published between 1985 and 1990. Debertin and Pagoulatos examined the mix of articles published in the AJAE over a longer timeframe and found that the percentage of non-quantitative articles fell from 100% during the 1936 to 1938 time period to 9% during the 1980 to 1990 time period.

The distribution of research methods used in JOC contributions is provided in Table 8. The distinction between a survey article (which uses simple statistical analysis) and quantitative analysis article is admittedly arbitrary. A different set of reviewers might report a higher percentage of quantitative articles. Despite these difficulties in classification, the JOC has published a lower percentage of quantitative articles relative to the percentages published for the RAE and the AJAE. Thirty nine percent of the JOC contributions are classified as primarily quantitative while articles reporting on survey research and primary data collected represent 20%. Theory and discussion articles represent approximately 37% of the contributions while 4% of the overall contributions are labeled as case studies. Case study contributions are notable absence from the later

volumes of the journal. Otherwise, the JOC does not appear to evolve toward or away from any particular type of research.

Table 8. Primary Research Method of JOC Articles 1986-2003

	Survey	Quantitative Analysis	Theory/Discussion	Case Study
All years	20%	39%	37%	4%
1986-1991	26%	26%	37	12%
1992-1996	11%	65%	24	0%
1997-2003	23%	30%	47	0%

Target Audience

Academic journals, particularly those supporting agricultural research, often classify the type of articles published based on the article's appeal to research, extension, or teaching audiences. Audience classification of JOC articles is provided in Table 9.

Articles are classified as extension when both the subject matter and presentation made the article useful and assessable to non-specialist or industry audiences. Over half of the JOC contributions are classified as targeting researchers while most of the remaining articles are classified for a primary extension audience. Somewhat surprisingly, only one JOC article is specifically targeted toward undergraduate instruction. The teaching classification does not include case study articles which could obviously be used in an instructional setting.

Table 9. Audience Category of JOC Articles 1986-2003

	Research	Extension	Teaching	Not Classified
All years	56%	36%	1%	8%
1986-1991	51%	47%	2%	0%
1992-1996	53%	37%	0%	11%
1997-2003	64%	22%	0%	14%

International Issues and Evolving Business Forms

While most JOC articles focus on U.S. cooperatives, 12% of the contributions target cooperatives in other countries (Table 10). Eight percent of the JOC articles explicitly focus on possible evolutions to the cooperative business form. Not surprisingly, the emphasis on non-traditional cooperative structures and international issues increases in the later time periods.

Table 10. JOC Articles 1986-2003 with Focus on Non-US Cooperative or Non-Traditional Form

	Non-U.S. Focus	Evolving Cooperative Business Forms
All years	12%	8%
1986-1991	9%	2%
1992-1996	8%	13%
1997-2003	19%	8%

Summary of the History of the JOC

A wide variety of authors from U.S. and non-U.S. universities, industry participants, and government specialists have contributed to the JOC. The majority of JOC articles appear to relate to marketing and financial performance issues facing farmer-owned marketing or supply cooperatives. However, articles relating to a wide array of cooperative types and issues have appeared in the journal. As mentioned previously, a variety of authors have analyzed publications in agricultural economic journals. Many of these articles have raised questions as to whether a specific journal has become too quantitative, too specialized, or inaccessible to broader audience groups. It could be argued that the JOC, perhaps because of its subject matter focus, has remained diversified in other respects.

Mission of the JOC

The initial call for papers issued in 1986 stated:

The Journal of Agricultural Cooperatives is a refereed journal published by the American Institute of Cooperation. Its purpose is to encourage research on issues of importance to U.S. farmer cooperatives and provide a forum for the review and exchange of research results among individuals in universities, cooperatives and government.

The Journal invites manuscripts of practical interest to U.S. farmer cooperatives. Submissions should report results of applied or basic research on economic, legal, or sociological aspects of farmer cooperation. Reviews will be conducted anonymously by members of the respective professions. Articles will be selected on the basis of interest to cooperatives and researchers, originality, and effectiveness of presentation.

The JOCs current statement of aims and scope reads:

The journal provides a forum for original scholarly work on research, extension, and teaching issues related to cooperatively-owned business organizations and the cooperative business model. The emphasis of the journal is on cooperatives in the agribusiness and rural sectors and for cooperatively-related research with a strong economic or business focus. Manuscripts on related topics including emerging rural business forms are also encouraged. The journal is open to manuscripts focusing on all types of cooperatives and for relevant scholarly work from all

professional disciplines. International submissions and articles focusing on globalization issues are also encouraged

The journal welcomes both theoretical and empirical research articles. Case-study submissions, teaching or outreach manuscripts, and short (1,200 words or less) commentary articles will also be considered for publication in separate sections of the journal. Submissions in these categories should be accessible to the non-specialist reader. All articles are subject to anonymous (double blind) peer review and will be selected for publication based on their originality, significance, validity, clarity and value in information exchange between academics and practitioners in the field of cooperative business.

The JOCs statement of aims and scope (which was developed by the editorial board prior to this analysis) appears consistent with the journal's history of publishing a wide variety of articles related to the cooperative business form. An important question, and a worthy topic for further research, is what mix of articles would be most valued by the JOC readership. A survey of JOC readers might provide some interesting insights into the preferred direction for the journal.

Impact of Electronic Format

The advent of electronic publishing has created new approaches to fulfilling the functions of academic journals. Smith (1999) defines these functions as editorial, quality control, marketing, dissemination, and conferring recognition. The editorial function involves filtering submissions to determine whether material falls within the realm of the journal and is of interest to the readers. The quality control functions, which are jointly

performed by the reviewers, editors, and technical editors, control the content and form of the contributions. Academic journals also have fairly obvious roles in disseminating and archiving information and in marketing their publication within the appropriate academic community.

The advantages and disadvantages of electronic publishing have been examined by numerous authors. Electronic publishing can provide faster turn around, which results in more up-to-date information being published (Brown). Electronic published articles can also be searched more easily and provide greater accessibility (Brown, Neal). This type of publishing is also generally considered to be less expensive. Estimates of total savings which accrue to authors, editors, and libraries vary widely and range from 20% (Whisler and Rosenblat) to 70% (Harnad). Electronic formats have other potential advantages including direct links to references and related data, animation or interactive charts, and greater interaction including the development of “living documents” that are continuously updated (Wilkinson). However these features require a significant departure from the standard academic journal format.

Commonly listed disadvantages of electronic formats include difficulty in reading (Glenquist), exclusion from indexing and abstracting services (Gessner), and the perishable nature of both the citation and the journal archive (Raney). The credibility of electronic journals has also been raised as a potential disadvantage (Raney, Glenquist). Because credibility relates directly to one of an academic journal’s primary functions (concurring recognition), it has received the most attention.

The challenge for the JOC, as for other electronic journals, is to capitalize on the inherent advantages of electronic format while minimizing potential shortcomings. The

stability of the URL links, and the security of the archives are largely technical issues. The JOC should actively work to be included in search and abstract services such as JSTOR and AGECON SEARCH. The journal's current publication process, which involves technical editing but not typesetting, does not appear to create any substantial readability issues. Maintaining the credibility of the journal through a fair and thorough peer review process will be a key success factor.

Future Focus of the Journal

The journal's new electronic format presents opportunities for the journal to build on its rich history. Contributions can now be distributed as soon as they complete the review and editorial process. A more rapid turnaround can make the journal more engaging and relevant. Because the journal is no longer allocated a fixed number of pages, a greater flexibility to publish quality manuscripts exists. This flexibility is consistent with the journal's history and broad aim and scope.

It is the editor's intention to continue to publish a balance a diversified set of quality articles relating to the cooperative business model. The journal's revitalized linkages with the NCERA-194 committee will a key factor in encouraging quality submissions and timely reviews. The ultimate success and contribution of the journal will depend on authors submitting high quality, relevant manuscripts and reviewers providing a timely, efficient and constructive quality control mechanism.

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