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Reflections on the Journal of Cooperatives 1986-2003

Phil Kenkel, Roger Ginder and Taeyoon Kim*

*Phil Kenkel (phil.kenkel@okstate.edu) is Professor and Chair of the Bill Fitzwater Cooperative Center, Department of Agricultural Economics at Oklahoma State University
Roger Ginder (ginder@iastate.edu) is a Professor in the Department of Economics at Iowa State University
Taeyoon Kim (Taeyoon.kim@okstate.edu) is a Research Assistant in the Department of Agricultural Economics at Oklahoma State University.

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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, and considers issues relating to electronic publication. The journal's historical and current mission statements are also discussed, and a future thrust for the journal is presented.

Key Words: Cooperative, academic journal, electronic publishing

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to provide a reflective look at the *Journal of Cooperatives (JOC)*, which was formerly 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 United States based academic journal focusing 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.

*Phil Kenkel (phil.kenkel@okstate.edu) is Professor and Chair of the Bill Fitzwater Cooperative Center, Department of Agricultural Economics at Oklahoma State University
Roger Ginder (ginder@iastate.edu) is a Professor in the Department of Economics at Iowa State University
Taeyoon Kim (Taeyoon.kim@okstate.edu) is a Research Assistant in the Department of Agricultural Economics at Oklahoma State University.

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 (AIC). The AIC was organized as a cooperative and operated as a 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 yearbook “American Cooperation” that was widely distributed. The AIC membership included all of the major regional agricultural cooperatives and 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 Yearbook” The stated 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. A mission statement for the JAC was included in the first call for papers (see Appendix). The NC-140 regional research committee on cooperatives was also set up in the spring of 1986, establishing a continuing linkage with the journal. AIC continued to publish the journal until the group’s demise in 1991. The National Council of Farmer Cooperatives took over publication of the journal in 1991 and continued until 2003 when the last volume was issued as a print publication. The *JOC* resumed publication in 2007 as an electronic journal sponsored by the NCERA-194 Regional Research Committee on Cooperatives. The *JOC* editorial board refreshed the mission statement in the spring of 2007 (see Appendix).

Jeffrey Royer served as the first editor of the JAC. 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 1995-1997, and John Dunn served from 1998 to 2003. Three of the first five editors were from land-grant universities and two were from the cooperatives program of USDA. 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 first set of articles spanned a wide range of topics including producer contracts, credit scoring, patronage credits, international marketing,

voting systems, and member expulsion. The first issue also included an invited paper 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 characterization of scholarly work is always somewhat subjective, most readers would classify the first articles as applied rather than theoretical. Authors of the first articles included agricultural economists, an industry practitioner from the Federal Credit System, a rural sociologist, and an attorney. Two of the articles had an international focus.

Analysis of the *JOC* Contributions

This brief overview of the *first* issue sets the stage for an analysis of what types of articles the JOC has published, who has authored the articles, and how the mix of articles has changed. The analysis is based on the 117 articles and invited papers 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. Debertain and Pagoulatos examine how the ratio of quantitative to non-quantitative articles published in the American Journal of Agricultural Economics has changed over time. Robinson and Colyer use a wide range of criteria to examine the relevance and changes of the Review Agricultural Economics. 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 category, subject matter, research method, author rank, author institutional affiliation, author discipline, and focus (United States 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 readers. The process of classifying articles is inherently subjective but hopefully 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 listed on the title page. Finally, the categorization into United States 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	117	112	94	97	114	108
1986 to 1991	43	43	41	36	41	43	43
1992 to 1996	38	38	38	27	32	37	34
1997 to 2003	36	36	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 students represent 5% (Table 2). While the *JOC* has been an outlet for beginning academics, it has clearly appealed to seasoned academics. The catch all “other category” represents 26% of the first authors. This category includes first authors who are simply listed as “agricultural economist” or “rural sociologist” and authors listed as director of cooperative research center, instructor, lecturer, post-graduate researcher, or government or industry affiliate. Cooperative industry participants are listed as first authors on two articles. Two hundred and five authors are listed on the 117 articles published in the *JOC*. The distribution by overall authorship is similar to that of first authorship. Graduate students make up a larger share of the overall authorship category, which reflects that they are more

commonly listed as junior authors. No major trends in the authorship categories are apparent.

Table 2. Authorship Categories of *JOC* Articles 1986 to 2003

	Professor/Associate	Assistant Prof.	Graduate Student	Other*
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%
First author (all years)	47%	22%	4%	28%
Overall authorship (all years)	46%	18%	11%	25%

*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 United States universities, seven universities located outside the United States, 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 United States. 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 most recent time period.

Table 3. Institution 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 9% of all articles. This may underrepresent the treatment of the topic since the category of equity systems overlap with financial performance and management. Articles dealing with membership benefits and governance issues (topics also somewhat unique to cooperative businesses) account for 16% of the published articles.

Table 5. Subject Classifications of JOC Articles 1986-2003

	Mang	Financial Perform	Member Benefits/ Governance	Equity Systems	Mkting.	Property Rights /Legal	Not Classified
All years	40%	23%	16%	9%	4%	3%	4%
1986 to 1991	28%	19%	19%	14%	12%	5%	5%
1992 to 1996	37%	29%	21%	11%	0%	3%	0%
1997 to 2003	58%	22%	8%	3%	0%	0%	8%

Cooperative Function

The USDA classifies agricultural cooperatives into marketing, farm supply, and service (USDA). This classification and the additional category “manufacturing/value-added” are used to analyze the type of cooperative emphasized in the *JOC* articles. A summary of the functional categorization is provided in Table 6. Fifty percent of the *JOC* contributions 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. Twenty percent of the *JOC* contributions are not focused on a specific type of cooperative. Of interest to note is that the percentage of articles dealing with manufacturing and value-added cooperatives has been relatively constant over time while interest in development of value-added cooperatives has increased dramatically.

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 to 1991	44%	19%	9%	12%	16%
1992 to 1996	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 has not been limited to the discussion of traditional farmer-owned cooperatives. On the other hand, the editorial board changed the journal’s name from the Journal of Agricultural Cooperation to the Journal of Cooperatives, beginning with volume 10 in 1995, to avoid excluding consumer cooperatives. Table 7 indicates that, despite that change, the proportion of articles related to consumer cooperatives has not

increased and remains quite low. This suggests that the journal is not reaching authors interested in consumer cooperatives despite the name change and needs to take additional steps to attract more articles in this area.

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 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. Articles are classified as either a report on survey research, quantitative analysis, a discussion article, or a case study. The discussion article category includes mostly narrative articles that tend to summarize or synthesize previous research or propose new constructs. Many of the discussion articles are invited papers. The distinction between articles using simple statistical analysis to summarize a survey and quantitative analysis article is admittedly arbitrary. It does appear that the *JOC* has published a lower percentage of quantitative articles relative to the percentages published for the RAE and the AJAE.

Forty-one percent of the *JOC* contributions are classified as primarily quantitative while articles reporting on survey research and primary data collected represent 21%. Theory and discussion articles represent approximately 31% of the contributions while 4% of the overall contributions are labeled as case studies. Case study contributions are notably absent from the later volumes of the journal.

The editorial board created an associate editor for case studies to help solicit, select, and edit case studies. The results in table 8 suggest that more work is needed to develop this publication category. Aside from case studies, 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

	Report on Survey	Quantitative Analysis	Theory/ Discussion	Case Study	Not Classified
All years	21%	41%	31%	4%	3%
1986-1991	26%	26%	37%	12%	0%
1992-1996	11%	63%	24%	0%	3%
1997-2003	28%	36%	31%	0%	6%

Target Audience

Many faculty appointments specify responsibilities in research, teaching, or extension. The classification of *JOC* articles based on the article's appeal to research, extension, or teaching audiences is provided in Table 9. Articles are classified as extension when both the subject matter and presentation make 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. 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. 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 Evolving Business 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%

Survey of Users

A survey of the JAC readers was conducted by editor Emerson Babb in 1989. The survey was based on readers' perceptions of the first three volumes of the JAC (1986–1988). The results of the survey are summarized in Table 11. Ninety-two percent of the respondents indicate the journal is useful or very useful in conducting research on cooperatives. The journal's usefulness in teaching receive somewhat lower ratings with 58% of the respondents giving a useful or very useful rating. Seventy seven percent of the respondents rate the articles as useful or very useful in extension or teaching adult audiences while 69% find the articles useful or very useful for making business decisions about cooperatives.

Table 11: Reader Survey- Journal of Agricultural Cooperation, 1989

	General Usefulness		Usefulness in Teaching About Cooperatives		Usefulness in Conducting Research on Cooperatives	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Not Useful	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Somewhat Useful	4	10%	9	42%	2	8%
Useful	24	60%	8	47%	13	54%
Very Useful	12	30%	2	11%	9	38%

Table 11 (continued): Reader Survey- Journal of Agricultural Cooperation, 1989

	General Usefulness		Usefulness in Teaching About Cooperatives		Usefulness in Conducting Research on Cooperatives	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Not Useful	0	0	0	0%	0	0%
Somewhat Useful	3	23%	5	31%	1	2%
Useful	9	69%	8	50%	26	67%
Very Useful	1	8%	3	19%	12	31%

Impact of Electronic Format

The advent of electronic publishing has created new approaches to fulfilling the functions of academic journals. Smith defines these functions as editorial, quality control, marketing, dissemination, and 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). Electronically 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; Grenquist). Because credibility relates directly to one of an academic

journal's primary functions (conferring 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 the electronic format while minimizing potential shortcomings. The stability of the URL links, and the security of the archives are important technical issues. The *JOC* has already initiated the process of supplying full-text versions of all volumes through AGECON SEARCH. The journal should actively work to be included in other search and abstract services such as JSTOR and Google Scholar. 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.

Historical Content of the *JOC*

The previous summary has described what the *JOC* has published. 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. 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.

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.

The journal's history indicates that value is added by continuing to publish a diversified set of quality articles relating to the cooperative business model. This review of historical content indicates case study articles, articles with a non-United States focus, articles on undergraduate instruction, and articles on evolving

cooperative structures have been notably absent in the *JOC*. All of these areas represent a potential for the *JOC* to increase its contribution. The journal's revitalized linkages with the NCERA-194 committee will be 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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Appendix

Mission Statement of the *JAC* as it appeared in the first call for papers in 1986:

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.

Current Statement of Aims and Scope of the *JOC* as revised by the editorial board in the spring of 2007:

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.