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The Journal Editorial Cycle and Practices

Lall B. Ramrattan and Michael Szenberg

Editors and authors both recognize that way that journals function needs to improve. Scholarly journals are the mainstays of scientific communication, and publication in them by academicians is the primary route to promotion, tenure, salary increases, recognition, and mobility. The scrutiny and assessment of the publication process is therefore of vital concern to the scientific community. The purpose of this volume is to relay editorial insights that will enlighten the academic stakeholders as well as the general public.

The literature on journal editorial practices is limited. Fritz Machlup (1962, 7) was one of the first to point out the importance of analyzing the “production of knowledge,” which included periodicals. He referred to “disclosure, dissemination, transmission, and communication.” In George B. Shepherd’s 1994 book, *Rejected: Leading Economists Ponder the Publication Process*, authors shared their experiences of how they dealt with their rejected manuscripts. The works of Joshua S. Gans and Shepherd (1994) and Gans (2001) are also in that vein, sharing significantly overlapping information on the subject. This book goes beyond the scope of those works and delves into the various phases of journal editing cycle from the editors’ perspectives.

A journal editorial cycle involves phases of rejection, revision, acceptance, publication, and risk management to reduce the chance of publishing unworthy papers. The journal editors allocate their efforts within various process groups in order to initiate, plan, execute, and control or monitor those phases of publication. This volume reviews the shared and unique experiences of editors in the various activities of those process groups.

The contributing editors were asked to reflect on their editorial environment, share the fruits of their experiences for both seasoned and aspiring writers, and disseminate that knowledge to the public. They

explain how they steer the course of their discipline by rejecting and accepting articles. Some editors explain how they cope with the complexities in their organization and operations. For instance, editors now receive many more manuscripts than in pre-Internet years, which, given the scarcity of resources available, creates an informational overload and the possibility that poor manuscripts might be accepted and worthy manuscripts might be rejected. The contributors reveal their experiences as well as their vision of how this organizational matrix is structured and implemented.

The first part of this volume deals with common and specific issues about journal editing. The second part examines the initiation, planning, execution, and controlling stages of journal editing.

Variety of Experiences

This work presents the experiences of the editors of prestigious journals such as the *American Economic Review*, *Journal of Economic Literature*, *Journal of Finance*, and *Review of Economic Studies* and other journals to provide a balanced and insightful perspective on the issue. Coleridge's definition of *beauty*—"Beauty is Multeity in Unity"—is appropriate.

As expected, the nature of editors' experiences varies by the nature of their journals. Journals differ by their underlying qualitative criteria, the compensation characteristics of their editors and editorial staff, and their technical or readable nature. We validated some of the major hypotheses in the literature and found that administrative efforts by journal editors are significantly correlated with the quality of a journal (Ramrattan and Szenberg 2003).

Some editors maintain a journal's quality through skepticism. In this function, they abide by George J. Stigler's (1988, 65) dictum that a deeply skeptical attitude may lead to the right formulation of ideas. Such an orientation supports an editor's role as a gatekeeper to the kingdom of knowledge. In that role, editors wield their power "either to help or to prevent a specific study from being published, since they decide who the referees will be" (Colander and Brenner 1992, 40–41). Several editors perform desk rejections, which preempt the refereeing process. Steven Pressman, coeditor of *Review of Political Economy*, has a contrarian view to this practice and believes that editors should act more like mentors than as gatekeepers.

Finally, it is the nature of some journals to be dedicated to a single paradigm, and these journals might be reluctant to publish unorthodox

papers. Until recently, the paradigm for the *Journal of Industrial Economics* organized articles according to structure, conduct, and performance analysis. Now industrial economics is analyzed through the lenses of game theory or case studies. Journals are also partial to scientific approaches, which are often divided into falsifiable hypotheses or validation of ideas. An author who is not conscious of the journal's archetype will be unlikely to find a home for his or her article.

Conforming Experiences with the Expectations of the Literature

An editor's decision process can be seen as being either probabilistic or deterministic. The chief editor usually sends out an article to two or three referees, each with a different probability of returning a successful review. Alternatively, the article may be sent to a particular referee who is known for certain review traits—fair, biased, tough, critical, or easy. There still remains the possibility that the editor may hold onto the article and not send it out to the referees for immediate review or reject it for not being cogently written, for having faulty logic, or for not sharing some elements of the journal's paradigm.

The traditional literature divides experiences into the categories of positive (science), normative (belief), and art (practical) criteria. Editors may emphasize one aspect over another to the extent of degenerating the other two over time: "Art advises, prescribes and directs; science observes, describes and explains," but both art and science must take into account "the freedom and cognitive nature of the human will" (Walras 1969, 58, 62). The Walrasian viewpoint about the human will can be articulated as a gatekeeping role where the editors exercise their will to believe and their will to determine which article to accept or reject. For instance, John M. Keynes rejected Milton Friedman's first paper on elasticity (which was critical of Arthur Pigou's stance) by sending it for review to Pigou. Pigou, for obvious reasons, had no will to believe Friedman's point of view (Gans 2001, 37).

Editors may look for articles that are empirical, complex, simple, and aesthetic. Gerard Debreu (1983, 203), a Nobel laureate in mathematical economics, wrote that he was "grateful to Roy Radner for his objection to an inesthetic feature of the first version" of his "Excess Demand Function" article. I have noted that "Words that express aesthetic values, such as 'beautiful,' 'ingenious,' 'simple,' 'graceful,' and 'elegant,' appear increasingly in the writings of scholars [including editors]. Although aesthetic criteria are hardly clear, for some, these qualities are expressed by the dictum 'less is more'" (Szenberg 1998, 4)

The contributors to this volume also recognize that authors are driven by the need to “publish or perish.” When this principle makes a “game of citations and peer approval that are supposed to certify to the scientist’s standing in the scholarly world, the game takes on an aesthetic dimension for scholars” (Szenberg 1998, 6). This drive to publish contributes to the increasing volume of articles, underscoring the remark that the “function of the editor is perhaps more important than ever before” (Medema, Cardoso, and Lodewijks 2002, 194). The need to publish or perish also elevates the risk that the production of more research may have “less effect on scholarship over time” (Weintraub 2002, 11). Journal editors must therefore exercise their authority in that capacity: “editors have much power either to help or to prevent a specific study from being published, since they decide who the referees will be,” and this idea is reinforced by the finding that “when the same proposals were resubmitted to a different set of reviewers . . . more than 25 percent of the decisions were reversed” (Colander and Brenner 1992, 40–41).

The technical complexity of journal articles continues to be elevated by journal editors. The Commission on Graduate Education in Economics (COGEE) (1991) found that the subject matter of economics has become increasingly technical and that journals have not abandoned essential formalism in their content. Starting with John R. Hicks (1946, 61) and Paul Samuelson (1947, 257), new complexities in static and dynamic changes in equilibrium estimates and in underlying parameters have increased the complexity of journal articles as well as editors’ efforts to discern them. The American Economic Association founded the *Journal of Economic Perspectives* to provide the specialist with a nontechnical source to keep abreast with the literature at a time when many journals were not giving up on their formalism.

Several editors in this book express a preference for empirical analysis, most likely aligning themselves with David Hume, who stated that if something cannot be measured, then it is better to cast it to the flames. Using information from seven journals, Daniel S. Hamermesh (1994, 58–61) examined a myth that unknown authors are treated somewhat unfairly and that editors send unknown authors’ work to referees whose opinions they do not trust.

Controversy: Scheduling and Other Issues

A schedule itemizes when the review process will begin and end. A pitfall in this schema is that some tasks that are sequenced could be done in

parallel fashion. This point has been commented on by several authors (Szenberg 1994; Pressman 1994; Azar 2006). I argued that the processing time could be shortened by allowing authors to make concurrent submissions to multiple journals. When an author submits an article and it is not accepted, the process has to be restarted with another journal. Although the practice of multiple submissions is an exception rather than the rule, information technology has brought the two sides closer, diffusing conflicts that may arise from this. Leaving out the lower and upper outliers that are shown in the journals that are listed in table 24.1, the average review time in 2012 is 3 to 6.5 months, with a standard deviation of about a month. Given the absence of a standard to measure this against, it can be inferred that review time has declined significantly. Several contributors to this book, such as John Pencavel (chapter 5), point out that a year is an excessive period for acceptance of a paper. For some editors, such as William A. Barnett (chapter 10), associate editors keep their own turnaround times. If the turnaround time for associate editors slows significantly, then at the end of their term, the position is offered to someone else. As a result, no overall information

Table 24.1

Review time at economics journals, 2012 (months)

Names	Optimistic	Mean	Pessimistic	Beta mean	Beta STD
<i>Journal of Economic Issues</i>	3	6	12	6.50	1.50
<i>Journal of Economic Education*</i>	2	12	36	14.33	5.67
<i>Land Economics</i>	3	4	6	4.17	0.50
<i>Economic Inquiry</i>	2	3.5	9	4.17	1.17
<i>Eastern Economic Journal</i>	2.5	4.5	6.5	4.50	0.67
<i>Journal of Behavior and Organization</i>	3	6	12	6.50	1.50
<i>Journal of Economic Perspectives</i>	0.75	1.1	1.6	1.13	0.14
<i>American Economist</i>	2.5	4	7	4.25	0.75
<i>Review of Industrial Organization</i>	2	3	6	3.33	0.67

Note: * Mode for optimistic estimate used for nonreporting.

Source: Direct email survey to authors from the author.

on the distribution of turnaround times for the journal as a whole was aggregated.

Editors vary in their rejection rates, as well. Some carry out desk rejections, while others follow the recommendations of their referees. They are also aware that some weak articles make it through the editorial process. How does an editor guard against this? For Pencavel (chapter 5), one way of dealing with this is “to play it safe. . . . to turn away potentially controversial papers, those that receive mixed reviews, and those that are out of the mainstream.”

Four years ago, the *American Economist* received a submission that was accompanied by a letter from a Nobel Prize-winner who supported the article. The author argued that his approval should serve as an alternative to the refereeing process. I had to reject his idea and noted Marcel Proust’s method of dealing with unsolicited manuscripts: “whenever Proust was asked to evaluate a manuscript, he always enclosed the following letter: ‘Divine work. It is a work of genius. I would not change a word. I take my hat off for you. All the best, Marcel Proust.’ The novelist wrote the same laudatory note to all potential writers who contacted him. When confronted about what he was doing, Proust said that he did not have time to read the submitted material because it interfered with his writing. By telling young authors that their work was that of a genius, he made sure that they would not return their revised papers to him with changes” (Szenberg, Ramrattan, and Gottesman 2006, 10). Such Proustian letters should be taken with a grain of salt. As for the paper, it was accepted eventually for publication after two major revisions.

Not all editors look for original contributions. For William E. Becker and Suzanne R. Becker (chapter 18), “it is not unusual to see authors rebottle wine with new labels.” According to Pencavel (chapter 5), “The *JEL*’s role is not so much that of publishing articles containing original frontier research but that of communicating an important class of scholarship to a wider intellectual community and of providing dispassionate assessment of that scholarship.”

Initiation Phase

One piece of invaluable information that comes out of this effort is the answer to the question “How does one become a journal editor?” Lawrence J. White (chapter 9) was asked to join the *Journal of Industrial Economics* and the *Review of Industrial Organization* based on his varied work experiences and publications in industrial organization, which formed his editorial viewpoint.

Timothy Taylor (chapter 23) became an editor of the *Journal of Economic Perspectives* at the age of twenty-six. He found graduate education at Stanford to be boring, and after working as a reporter for the *San Jose Mercury News*, he was recommended to Joe Stiglitz to be the managing editor of the *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, a journal that specializes in taking sophisticated economics and turning it into enjoyable and popular reading.

For Pencavel (chapter 5), breaking into a journal editorship required some preparatory training. He wrote "In effect, my years as an associate editor were something of an apprenticeship to an eminent and honorable scholar, and I benefitted greatly from the training and education I received from Moe [Abramovitz]." Pencavel considers his editorial effort to be "largely a labor of love. No doubt, I worked hard at the position. I took a deep personal interest in the well-being of the journal and invested much effort in it." At the same time, being motivated by a desire to enhance his knowledge, he also solicited articles that he wanted to learn from.

Barnett (chapter 10) writes that his editorship grew out of a conflict situation that arose between two journals. Steven Pressman (chapter 20), on the other hand, took the journeyman's path: he started as an associate editor and eventually was offered the editor's position. And so was I (Szenberg, chapter 22), after receiving the Irving Fisher award. I was first offered a coeditorship with an economist who served as the managing editor, but the managing editor refused to share his duties, so the board voted for me to serve as the sole editor.

Planning

Editors bring specific goals to their editorships. White's (chapter 9) objective was to provide a "top-tier journal" through the publication of "good, informative, thought-provoking papers." Pencavel (chapter 5) provided potential authors with specific instructions on how to write a research article. He asked that the paper should not read as though "X (1980) claimed this, Y (1984) argued that, and Z (1989) responded in this way." He insisted and planned for well-reasoned arguments in articles, observing that "after scholars put down these arguments and claims in writing, they often become attached to their papers almost as parents are to their babies."

A journal's plan has milestones for meeting publication deadlines. Papers are selected to make each issue of the journal a unique piece. A cursory look at some of the journals indicates that ranking authors and

pieces on economic issues of the day vie for the lead article positions. Editorial pieces are usually placed upfront.

In other instances, readability is important. The objectives of the *Journal of Economic Perspectives* and the *Journal of Education* are “thought, exposition, and grammar.”

Execution

Although most editors did not describe their journals’ organizational structure, it does vary. According to R. Preston McAfee (chapter 3), the *American Economic Review* utilizes “excessive organization” in the editorial process. Its staff in Pittsburgh accepts online submissions and forwards them to editors. The editors then assign papers to coeditors who are experts in their fields. Papers are also assigned to avoid conflict of interest. Thus, editors of the *American Economic Review* practice a matrix type of organization that has a mixture of functionality and project characteristics.

Many journals adopt the double-blind review process even though it is not difficult to identify the authors of the papers via the Internet. Some editors practice desk rejections depending on their standards, topics, paradigm, audience, and other factors. For White (chapter 9), “authors want a reasonably rapid initial editorial decision from a journal; if the initial decision is negative, a clear explanation why and helpful comments for improvement from referees; if the initial decision is positive (an invitation to revise and resubmit), clear instructions from the editor as to what is expected and how to interpret the referee reports; and a high probability that the revise-and-resubmit process will involve only a few rounds and will have a favorable ultimate outcome.”

Some journals, such as *Macroeconomic Dynamics* and the *American Economist*, make their journals user-friendly by interviewing eminent economists and publishing their life and work philosophies. Barnett (chapter 10) explains that the drive for his journal was “the explosive growth in high-quality, scientific research in macroeconomics throughout the world.” As such, he focuses on interviewing technical persons, such as Wassily Leontief, James Tobin, and Franco Modigliani. Reflecting on the scope of these interviews, one finds rays of spontaneous thought from minds that “breathe and dream of economics.”

The *Journal of Economic Perspectives* is unique in its execution. As Timothy Taylor (chapter 23) explains, “rather than just making comments such as ‘this section needs tightening up,’ ‘this argument isn’t quite

clear,' or 'the discussion here seems repetitive,' a hands-on editor (me) would work through every line of every paper." This also means that he changes the paper electronically. As he quotes from William Strunk: if a man is drowning in a swamp, "it was the duty of anyone attempting to write English to drain this swamp quickly and get his man up on dry ground, or at least throw him a rope." Pressman (chapter 20), in line with Taylor (chapter 23), thinks of the editorial process as "one part crapshoot and one part triage." He is referring to the arbitrariness of the referee selection process and the desire to save a paper in the process. Becker and Becker (chapter 18) are meticulous about checking facts: "Sue recalls devoting hours each month in pre-Internet days in travel to or phone calls with the excellent and always helpful reference desk at the Indiana University library verifying quotations, references, and missing citation details."

Control

White (chapter 9) controls his flow of articles by "leaning more toward empirically oriented articles." He is meticulous about "extreme data points" and respect for the data. Papers that do not measure up empirically meet with a "desk rejection." He injects himself into the review process: "My letter includes my own instructions in addition to the referees' reports." Pencavel (chapter 5) mentions the aphorism that the "the referee is always right." He finds that "it is not a bad rule of thumb for an editor to act as if the referee's claims are correct and to ask the author of the paper to explain the argument more carefully so that a diligent referee should not draw the wrong inference."

Taylor (chapter 23) explains that the *Journal of Economic Perspectives* requires authors to accept the editor's revisions: "Many authors will throw out or overrule 10, 20, or even 50 percent of the advice they get. But by accepting most of the advice, their article is typically finished after one or two revisions and does not drag on through many multiple revisions, which can easily lead to bad feelings." He also holds that a good editor must be able to confront the egos of authors. Becker and Becker (chapter 18) are strict regarding their journal's style requirements: "We had one author who had a paper that made it through the referee process but later withdrew his manuscript when we informed him that editorial changes were required, including conformity with our reference style even if it did not conform to the style options that were available in LaTeX."

I try to be tactful in communicating rejections. Here is a representative rejection letter for the *American Economist*:

Dear _____,

Attached please find the referee's report on your submission. He or she finds that the paper is well written but does not offer anything novel to warrant publication. I hope that this does not discourage you from future submissions. We all face rejections, and a famous study found that successful people face more rejections than unsuccessful people. I have a motto that I am guided by and share with friends and students: "Rejections energize me."

Best wishes and kindest regards,

Michael

Conclusions

Journal editors in economics are guided by art, correspondence, coherence, or ontology principles, including paradigms and positive research program methodologies. The most that the author can do is make sure that the manuscript is sent to the right journal because editors usually defend some paradigm. After that hurdle is cleared, the authors can think of editors as gatekeepers or mentors.

The characteristics of journal editors can be grouped into a few general types. As grouped by Axel Leijonhufvud (1973), a leading macrotheorist, editors can be viewed as belonging to a tribe with caste (fields) and status (transitivity) considerations that are arrayed by "Grads, Adults, and Elders" and operate under a "Totems and Social Structure." This complex subject matter generates scientific research that is kept in check by nonscientific considerations, thereby underscoring the varying role of the editors.

Both the gate-keeping role and the mentorship role of editors are significant. Both aspects were important in the publishing of David Ricardo's *Principles of Political Economy and Taxation* (1817). The editor, James Mills, asked Ricardo to revise his submitted chapters several times despite the author's reluctance. Mills also insistently encouraged Ricardo to complete the work. It is as if Mills saw Ricardo's hidden talents. Their creative interaction forged a masterpiece in economics. Such an exemplar of economic editing should remain paramount for all times.

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