

Editors Talking

Herbert Jack Rotfeld

At the increasingly common “meet the editors” sessions at academic conferences, editors of academic journals are sitting side-by-side with people they might variously consider competitors, colleagues or compatriots in misery. People attending the sessions are seeking insight into what they might expect as the products of their labors go into the months-long rabbit hole of the review process. The editors' perspectives on these same sessions are far from unidimensional or monolithic, alternately seeking papers for submissions, readers for potential citations, visibility for the journal name, young minds to influence or subscriptions to sell. Sometimes they do not seem to know why they are there as they read from a series of slides showing the tables of contents of recent issues. Unnoticed, even by some of the editors themselves, we are talking to each other. I have been listening.

Twenty-five years ago, while gathering articles for an analysis of past research on appeals to audience fears, I had trouble tracking down one article that seemed quite important. Despite having been published in a journal with a French title and limited availability in US libraries, the citation appeared in many reference lists. More than once, authors quoted from it. Finally, with a special trip to the closed stacks of the University of Illinois' main library in Urbana, in a dusty hallway where the ceiling often dropped down to slightly over five feet clearance requiring me to duck under the crossing support beams, I finally tracked down the journal.

Unlike all other publications commonly cited on this topic in the English literature, the articles were all in French, as should have been expected from the French title, though there were English abstracts between the title and main text. Being pathologically monolingual, I do not speak French. As I waited for a friend to have the time to convey an informal translation from the photocopy that was the product of my quest, a closer review of some of the articles citing the French article yielded an interesting discovery. Authors who quoted the article were actually taking sentences from the abstract, while citations to the article took words from the abstract without quotation marks. So when I finally got my friend over for translation, my question became much more narrow: does the article make the often-quoted statements found in the abstract? Of course—you know where this is heading—it did not. And according to the French guidelines in the front of the journal, the abstract was probably written by the editors, not the authors.

The authors citing this article apparently never read it beyond the abstract. Or worse, maybe many of the authors just copied the citation from someone else.

I have participated in too many “meet the editors” conference programs to count, and traveled to many universities when a group of editors have been invited as part of special seminars for doctoral students or junior faculty. And as I hear the same common comments from the other editors, I think of this story. Regardless of what is said in the formal presentations, the first question is almost always along the lines of “What sort of papers would you like to see?” or the more common, “How do you feel about qualitative research?” Aside from the various directives, platitude, PowerPoint displays and technical requirements, the editors' guidance for up-and-coming academic authors can be summarized in a single directive: READ.

Editors would like to get more papers from authors who read the journal, read the articles cited in the research manuscript, read articles in the journal unrelated to the new manuscript for an idea of the editorial focus, read unrelated articles that might indicate important concerns of method or interpretation, read the manuscript guides for general concerns beyond technical requirements and read editorials where issues related to the conduct of research might be discussed.

What type of papers would we like to receive? If authors read the journal, the question would not be necessary. If a young scholar cannot find any articles in a journal interesting, it is doubtful that their own research would be of interest to the journal's editors. This does not mean gratuitous citation of a handful of papers of near irrelevance to the research must be included in the reference list, though this is what many authors are doing these days. Reading a journal reveals the editorial mission, the types of articles they publish and the types of work that should be submitted there.

Despite the ongoing explosion in new academic journals from commercial publishers, the established journals are all experiencing their own explosion in submissions. As a result, no one has enough editorial board members or ad hoc reviewers on hand to review everything. But then, editors are not reviewing everything. Many papers are rejected without reviews simply because the submissions are inappropriate for that journal. Too many authors compose papers, then select a journal whose title might seem related and send it off. Consumer studies encompasses many things, and many journals with the word consumer in the title have widely divergent interests.

Many editors report that their “bench” or “desk” rejections are at an all-time high. Journals with “advertising” in the title are receiving papers that are not about the mass communications business. Journals with a focus on public policy are receiving papers whose sole value relates to short-run concerns of marketing management. *JCA*'s origins are with the consumer movement and consumer protection, and our journal publishes research and analysis of the *interests of consumers* in the marketplace. Despite this being clearly stated in the manuscript guides, we receive a handful of papers per month focused on general studies of consumer psychology or findings whose primary interest is for marketing management or potential business profits, for which the authors all receive a letter from the editor thanking them for their interest in the journal.¹

Editors often discuss the papers that are rejected after reviews, noting that these also include comments for the authors from reviewers with detailed information on basic concerns that should be followed as the paper is revised for submission to another journal or a conference. But too many authors do not do that, apparently reading the first sentences indicating rejection and throwing the rest of the message into the electronic trash. All experienced editors have heard from editorial board members who, after they were sent a paper, replied back that the same work was critiqued earlier for another publication. That in itself is not a problem, but these reviewers often also report that the paper was not revised for the new submission. Even if the second journal has a different editorial mission than the original target for submission, the paper is unaltered. Again, the authors had not read any articles that were published in the journal receiving the new submission.

Editors also would like authors to read the articles that are cited. Too often, like the article from the French journal dug up years ago, too many references appear to be a checklist of titles or abstracts. The articles are not read and summarized to indicate how the prior work influenced

the conceptualization for a new study. Instead, past works of relevant-sounding titles are listed, or research articles are cited for things they said instead of for the results of the research.

The ineluctable impression is that too many authors consider the journals' review process a type of lottery. If they keep trying with the exact same product, eventually some editor will accept it. And sometimes that is true. But often it is not.

It is true that editors are all different, with different decision systems and different approaches to the job. But that just raises another factor for academic authors to understand. In addition to deciding if a journal is an appropriate outlet for their manuscript so it will be seen by others working in the field, they also need to assess the editor. Freelance magazine writers do this all the time, but the academic authors seem blind to such considerations. The information is not as readily available as manuscript guides, but it can provide valuable direction before a researcher spends months awaiting for a decision. Within the first year on the job, certain practices become obvious to numerous authors, for better or for worse. Many authors publish editorials stating their personal perspectives or priorities. In addition, senior faculty or doctoral advisors can easily be found who personally know something about various journal editors and their working style. The editors of journals owned by professional societies are extensively screened and interviewed by a committee in which they have to state their professional views. And they go to "meet the editors" sessions at conferences.

In theory, under the double-blind review process, experts in the area of the manuscript's work assess the quality of research and make editorial recommendations on the contribution to the literature. And based on those reviews, the editor decides whether to accept or reject the manuscript. Sometimes a revision is needed because points are not clear or some parts need more explanation to fully assess how well the research was conducted. The reviewers provide expertise beyond what any sane editor can hope to possess for any wide-ranging journal of any social science. They can improve some manuscripts and *help* editors make decisions.

It is true that some editors, reviewers and even administrators making promotion or tenure decisions are misguided by a gross misunderstanding of what double-blind reviews can and cannot do. And some editors do not want to make what can be difficult editorial decisions. Some editors confuse the review process with that of a doctoral committee, so they act like an objective committee chair, considering all reviewers to be, in effect, voting on the final version. Some editors use the reviewers to avoid being blamed by authors for a negative decision, while others live in fear of offending members of the editorial board. Too many editors seem to like the prestige of the position but not the work it entails, so the job is handed off to clueless graduate students who count and score the rating points from reviewers. At best, a journal's double-blind referees can only assess if the literature of past work and relevant theory are adequately addressed, whether the method is appropriate for the research questions and that there are not clear mistakes in the statistics.

A manuscript that goes through the review process does not provide a stamp that it is correct; errors can be missed or research can be misunderstood. The reviewers provide an expertise that an editor cannot always possess and can only conclude that it would be a contribution to the literature, that the research is solid, clear and honest.

In the end, the research job of the academic author is not just collecting data and writing a manuscript. It requires reading. On this, all editors seem to agree.

Footnotes

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A side note is to also read the names on the editorial board, looking for people with expertise in the types of research of the study. If an editor does not have board members with the expertise related to the paper, they might not have anyone available with the expertise to review it.