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Articles

Publishing in Professional Journals

Peter J. Barry

My assignments as a past editor of the *Western Journal of Agricultural Economics* and as current editor of the *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* have provided unique opportunities to view the publication and research activities in agricultural economics. As an editor, I could not help but become better acquainted with the diversity of the subject matter in our field, the issues addressed, and the people involved. One gains a profound appreciation for the quest for knowledge and the intellectual efforts of people, working individually or collectively, to add to this knowledge.

As in most endeavors, the people involved in the journal process, authors, reviewers, journal readers, editors, are strongly motivated by self-interest. Some observers have recently worried that journal publication reflects too much the self-interest of those involved, especially authors, and that professional interests have become secondary, that creativity and risk-taking in journal publication are stifled, and that gamesmanship by authors (some reviewers, too) has become too prominent. My impression is that such concerns are exaggerated but are nevertheless features of the journal environment.

Professional journals provide several key functions, according to a recent article by Lacy and Busch.¹ First, journals disseminate information about new ideas, methods, institutions, theories, data, or ways of approaching problem situations. They foster scientific inquiry, dialogue, and debate and become the primary means of advancing an area of knowledge.

Journals are "gatekeepers." They serve a quality control function by vouching for the scientific integrity of the work involved. The decision to publish based on formal reviews of manuscripts by experts and editorial staff is a vital part of this function.

Lacy and Busch write further that journals have been responsible for enforcing scientific norms in the creation of disciplinary knowledge. That means they exercise a fair and consistent application of "objective standards in a universalistic manner, organized skepticism, disinterestedness, communality, and emotional neutrality." Editors and reviewers do not legislate the normative criteria in their respective fields. Rather, they are entrusted to apply the accepted and commonly understood research values of their particular discipline.

They conclude that journal publication is a forum that confers professional recognition and other rewards, because the performance of scientists is largely judged by their publications. Publication plays a major role in a professional's career advancement. The criteria often are imperfect because administrators and other evaluators may place more emphasis on the number of journal publications and where they are published than on the value of the contribution to the field. This places a still greater burden on the journals to evaluate the value of the authors' contributions.

How have journal functions evolved in a changing intellectual environment? Scientists know that keeping up with new developments in their field is especially challenging. Specialty areas become more refined and fragmented and are subject to periodic changes. Methods of analysis become increasingly sophisticated. Mathematical techniques often appear to dominate and new ideas may sometimes appear to be based more on refinements and twists, or on tinkering with existing models and methods rather than on resolving current problems or understanding key economic relationships. The depth, scope, and complexity of agricultural economics have expanded considerably, and the competition among scientists to produce rather than consume new knowledge has grown as well.

At the same time, professional journals have taken on greater importance relative to bulletins, reports, and other types of publications in reporting new scientific knowledge. Journals, therefore, have assumed more responsibility in verifying the integrity of the work

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¹W. B. Lacy and L. Busch, "Guardians of Science: Journals and Journal Editors in the Agricultural Sciences," *Rural Sociology*, Vol. 47, 1982, pp. 429-48.

and testifying to the productivity of individual scientists. In response, journal submissions have risen as has the number of journals. And, even within a discipline, journals vie for professional status.

These developments have created a more complex environment for each of the major participants in journal publication. Small wonder that authors have become more strategic in planning publication activities, considering the growth in analytical sophistication, more publication outlets, greater competition, high degrees of uncertainty about publication prospects, the typically lengthy process of journal publication, and the professional rewards at stake. Keeping one's publication pipeline full, diversifying publication outlets, planning the sequence of submissions, and engaging in more joint work are examples of the elements of a publication strategy.

Journal editors, staffs, and reviewers must scrutinize contributions closely, and journal readers must be more strongly equipped to understand, evaluate, and synthesize published work of varying degrees of technical sophistication. Many readers will not read a general journal from cover to cover. Rather, the tendency of scientists to specialize in subject matter areas and analytical techniques, and the availability of other journals, suggest that individual readers will be attracted to few articles in a single issue. Finally, more effort is needed by the scientific community to move the knowledge reported in journals into education, policy, and managerial channels for the benefit of various clientele groups.

My perception of journal publication is that the process works well. I do not sense that authors have been inhibited from taking risks, have had creativity stifled by concerns about career advancement, or have engaged in manuscript reviews with an eye on their own work. (It is the editor's job, of course, to manage the review process to avoid such conflicts of interest between authors and reviewers.)

I do not sense that authors engage in excessive gamesmanship by submitting the same article to

several journals, by misleading editors about prior publication, by trying to guide the review process, or by arguing about editorial decisions. (I do, however, have a few interesting exceptions filed away.)

I do not feel that authors exploit the journal's review process to improve the quality of their own work. Rather, it is natural to expect that reviewers' comments and suggestions will contribute to the quality of research and the effectiveness of its presentation. In my own work, the assistance from anonymous reviewers has consistently proved helpful, and I view manuscript reviews as an integral part of the knowledge-creating process.

Nor do I believe that the journal publication process is prone to a high incidence of error in the accuracy and validity of published work. Nonetheless, the periodic publication of comments and replies and observations of authors' occasional self-discovery of errors during the publication process indicates that this is a matter of concern. This topic received considerable attention in articles in the *American Economic Review*, *Science*, and other media in which serious questions were raised about difficulties in replicating published work, high incidences of error, and the integrity of some authors.² Some journals have gone so far as to require authors to submit their data, computer programs, and statistical routines along with their manuscripts. These requirements vouch for the accuracy of the work and encourage greater self-scrutiny by the authors themselves. Clearly, these issues will continue to command attention.

All participants in agricultural economics publishing must continue to make the journal process function as effectively as possible. This effectiveness will grow from placing the proper functions of journals ahead of personal gain. By focusing on enhancing knowledge creation, through the collective efforts of individual scientists, we will continue to advance our field, serve our clientele, and, in the process, benefit ourselves.

²For example, see W. G. Dewald, J. G. Thursby, and R. G. Anderson, "Replication in Empirical Economics: The Journal of Money, Credit and Banking Project," *American Economic Review*, Vol. 76, 1986, pp. 587-603.