FRAGMENTATION AND REIFICATION OF THE SCHOLARLY JOURNAL

An ironic ‘perfect storm’ faces scholarly journals in humanistic and social scientific fields. This major convergence concerns all academics today. At the end of my remarks I also mention two other, perhaps related, matters that are of special concern to journal editors.

1. IDENTITY AND FRAGMENTATION. What is a scholarly journal and how are journals now perceived? All scholarly journals share ISSN numbering but even that descriptive measure is not predictive. Some ‘journals’ also have ISBN numbers for commercial purposes so that (as annuals) they also have a crack at being adopted as ‘book series’ by libraries. Some journals publish twice a year, some of us thrice, some quarterly, some even more frequently. As scholars and editors, we traditionally have a laissez-faire attitude toward the frequency of journal production. What we shared until recently was a sense that the academic journal appeared between covers as a deliberately constructed series of articles, sometimes on a common theme. We expect a ‘good’ academic journal to be committed to advancing knowledge in its field and to adhere to certain conventions: a standard of documentation, of double blind peer review, of ‘value-added’ editorial supervision and intervention. Aside from those elements (and perhaps even those aren’t entirely shared) there is no common agreement as to what defines a ‘scholarly journal.’

Now, however, excepting the case of those lucky Luddites who are print-only, academic essays that emanate from journals are increasingly accessed by electronic means, often through e-consolidators (e.g., JSTOR, Project Muse, Ebsco) whose readers search for particular content and individual essays rather than for the overall vision that often marks a particular journal. In our new technological environment, the role and status of editor, of peer review, of copyright (e.g., fair use) are shifting. The identity of the journal may be lost as access to content may actually increase.

We editors appeal to our professional associations to work with us (CELJ), the library community, bibliographers, information technology specialists, and other scholars to develop conventions for selecting new, more sophisticated metadata to enable more complete searches. We also appeal to our professional associations to work with us to investigate new forms of data-mining designed for sharing scholarship rather than for profiting from product sales.

2. IDENTITY REIFICATION OF JOURNALS THROUGH PROPOSED ERH RATINGS. Ironically, just as journal identity is fragmented by new modes of reader access, it is now reified by the grades (A,B,C, etc.) being developed by the European Reference Index for the Humanities as well as by groups in Australia and New Zealand (check on-line for your favorite journals’ ranking). CELJ members have expressed a range of reactions to these ratings: a) intellectual contempt for the idea or the process for such rankings in the non-objective world of humanist endeavors; b) fear that their journals would be included or excluded from consideration; c) pleasure or anger at the seemingly whimsical assignment of grades by a group of scholars seemingly unfamiliar with their fields. It is doubly ironic that this new judgment occurs just as our peers in science and social science themselves have begun to query the reliability of—and to
manipulate the results of—the 'citation index' formulas (for one example, see http://ideas.repec.org) that are the basis for evaluation in those fields though it is not yet the basis for grading in ERIH.

After the initial shock earlier about ERIH in 2007 and 2008, more journal editors have come to see the likely inevitability of some evaluation scheme in our bean-counting world. ERIH claims that its goal is to aid journals and their contributors, but it will inevitably inform institutional assessments and may result in rigid common protocols for scholarly journals.

CELJ now moves to new questions dedicated to some basic goals: How do we continue to nurture new modes of scholarship? How do we mentor younger scholars about scholarly publication? How do we—or should we—renew our commitment to the journal as a mode not only of specialist learning but also as a form of common discourse dedicated to developing the public intellectual?1

How do scholars, editors, and even publishers contribute to or gain control over this process? Can metrics be developed that more accurately represent humanist work than current citation indices or newer ‘usage’ indices? How might the publishing community (university presses as well as for-profit presses) respond to these rankings?

To consider these concerns, we need the collaborative help of adroit librarians as well as the swift intervention of our national associations in the humanities and social sciences—from the MLA and AHA and parallel organizations up to the NEH and ACLS.

In this emerging ‘perfect storm’ we need to collaborate at all levels and to appeal to our representative institutions for their active intervention. Rather than falling prey to the ERIH model, we need to bring together the most forward thinkers in academe in order to develop our own models. Consider this an appeal.

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Rob Townsend from AHA then responded, followed by Martin Burke, from the Journal of the History of Ideas, then Rob Schneider, from the American Historical Review. Discussion ensued. It was mentioned by an original assessor of the ERIH rankings that an agreement was originally reached that these ratings were not allowed to assess journals prescriptively but simply to provide a diagnostic canvassing of the framework in which scholars and editors operated; yet at the same time the ERIH webpage mentions that authors may well wish to consider these rankings in deciding where to submit articles. It was observed that certain criteria of the journal ranking, which may be pertinent within the European Union, are less so in the US. For instance, the example was given that the ERIH valuation of general over specialized journals was partially e.g. to make sure Romanian philosophers published in international journals, not just Romanian journals; but these circumstances would not pertain in the US or Canada. Similarly, Australian and New Zealand universities often like their academics to publish abroad because international journals are considered more competitive and prestigious, but this is most often the obverse within the US. Moreover, the rankings somewhat arbitrarily prefer broad-coverage to specialist journals, when specialist journals often have a more stringent acceptance rate, and e.g. rank journals that publish poetry and fiction as well as academic articles below those that publish no poetry and fiction, even if the academic articles in the former are scrupulously refereed. On the first point, The Pacific Historical Review, a broad historical journal, was assigned a B ranking because ERIH thought the active ‘Pacific’ denoted something merely regional. In other words, often there is a sense the rankers have not looked in a detailed way at the journal's contents. In addition, ranking methods from the sciences are clearly being applied in an unadapted way to the highly different circumstances of the humanities. Yet, despite these problems, and despite the inevitable omissions and simplifications of any ranking system, the discussants recognized that some scheme of quantitative assessment was inevitable, that deans and provosts desired such metrics. What the discussants desired was for
journal editors to shape these metrics, to be able to give feedback on them, and to have enough of a voice in the process to feel that there are to some extent stakeholders within it. In addition, following up on Wheeler's earlier point about reification, one of the beneficial effects of journal rankings is that they do reinforce the idea of discrete rankings, and remind one that on an online database one can go from an A journal to a B journal to a C journal with two clicks of a mouse. Journal rankings may be an inevitable part of the twenty-first century academic framework, but they would be far more beneficial if editors play an active consultative role in shaping how they operate.

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1 Two recent challenges in journal submissions and peer review. As far as we call tell at CELJ, there seems to be an across-the-board decline in unsolicited journal submissions from senior academics—the very people who serve on our editorial boards and who have traditionally offered our most mature scholarship. Striving youth now produce the basic submissions; shorter pieces by senior scholars increasingly appear in solicited book collections. Many journals cleverly “push back” here by developing guest-edited or special-focus issues or forums in which senior and junior colleagues are invited to address some common strands. Good journals usually insist of blind peer review even of these submissions, though the editor's position here is especially delicate.

Peer review itself is the other matter of current concern. Some CELJ editors report that it is increasingly difficult to locate appropriate readers for peer review, in some measure because our academic culture does not reward scholars for so doing. Junior scholars report that their administrative heads advise them not to undertake peer reviews or even book reviews except for the most prestigious journals. Such work is considered 'mere service' and (often like journal editing) erased as a significant part of one's professional research or teaching. By the time such junior scholars become senior, they have been acculturated out of this crucial professional process of peer review though they themselves have often benefitted from it. Here, again, our professional associations must aid us if we are to retain the integrity of peer review, which is our most generous vocational work.