
Editorial

On journals

Refereed journals are at the core of the contemporary academic enterprise, probably more so now than ever before: most new knowledge, however defined, is carried in their pages. At the same time, there is intense pressure for individual academics to publish in ‘high-quality’ journals, to meet both individual (career progression) and collective (departmental evaluation) goals. As a consequence, there is increased pressure of submissions to journals.

But how much do we really understand about the roles that journals play in our daily (academic) lives? Having decided to stand down after twenty-five years as a coeditor of *Environment and Planning A (E&PA)*, I was asked to produce a ‘valedictory’ editorial, and decided to use it to muse on this question.⁽¹⁾

On hierarchies

Many disciplines have an implicit hierarchy of journals. (In some, notably economics, it is explicit.) Researchers are expected to publish in journals occupying the highest level of such hierarchies to gain their peers’ respect: even though many of them will never read *what* others have published, they will note *where* they have published. Academics are also expected to publish in such outlets to assist their departments to get high external evaluations (not least through the all-invasive UK Research Assessment Exercises—RAEs—and comparable exercises in an increasing number of countries).

E&PA is one of the journals which apparently meets the criteria for entry into the hierarchy’s highest level, though only for human geography. This is indicated, for example, both by citation levels and by the number of papers published there listed by individual UK academics in their RAE returns. The fourteen journals listed in order of number of papers included in the 2001 RAE submissions, excluding journals that are almost exclusively used by physical geographers only, were: *Environment and Planning A*; *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*; *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*; *Regional Studies*; *Urban Studies*; *Geoforum*; *Journal of Historical Geography*; *Progress in Human Geography*; *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*; *Political Geography*; *Economic Geography*; *Geographical Journal*; *Area*; and *Applied Geography*. *E&PA* got the largest number of listings, both from all geographers who submitted to that ‘cost centre’ (that is, subject group) and from those geographers who were in departments subsequently placed in the highest grades (5/5*: for more details on this list, see Johnston, 2003).

According to the ISI Web of KnowledgeSM website, the fourteen human geography journals with the highest impact factors in 2003, in order, were:⁽²⁾ *Progress in Human Geography*; *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*; *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*; *Political Geography*; *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*; *Antipode*; *Economic Geography*; *Environment and Planning A*; *Area*; *The Professional Geographer*; *Geoforum*; *Urban Geography*; and *The Australian Geographer*.

⁽¹⁾ With a little help from friends: thanks to Rich Harris and Kelvyn Jones for comments on a draft and to them plus Les Hepple, Tony Hoare, and Paul Plummer for continued discussions on this and other subjects. (I am also standing down after twenty-five years with *Progress in Human Geography*.)

⁽²⁾ An impact factor is obtained by dividing the number of current-year citations to articles published in the previous two years by the total number of articles published then: it is thus an indication of the average impact of a paper published in the journal’s recent issues.

E&PA had the most citations overall, but its impact factor was only half that of *Progress in Human Geography*, which had a factor of 3.653; *E&PA's* was 1.780. (On the interpretation of citation counts and impact factors, see Yeung, 2002.)

The two lists are very similar—especially so given that the first applies to UK human geography academics only whereas that from ISI covers all citations to a wide range of journals. The evidence seems clear: a relatively small number of journals is favoured by human geographers as the places in which to place their ‘best’ work, and the contents of those journals are most cited by their peers.

Games people play

What puts a journal into the highest rank? Two sets of factors might be important—the quality of the material submitted to the journal, and the stringency of its editorial decisionmaking, which together mean that only work of the highest quality gets published there. On the former, do authors choose which journals to send manuscripts to according to their perceptions of the quality of both paper and journal (that is, do they send their ‘best’ papers to ‘top’ journals, ‘lesser’ papers to ‘lesser’ journals, and so on)? Or do they send all material to a ‘top’ journal first in the hope that it will be accepted but then, if it is rejected, move down the hierarchy (a strategy suggested to me recently by the editor of a ‘top’—non-UK—political science journal!)?

Having decided to send the paper to a ‘top’ journal, why choose a particular one? Is it because of its audience—whether it is aimed at a general readership (such as all members of a learned society), for example, or those working in a specific subfield only? Or is it because of its circulation, or its citation count and impact factor, suggesting that authors believe that by publishing there they will reach a wider audience than through another outlet? Perhaps it is because they know an editor or a member of the editorial board, and may have been invited to submit a paper, either in general terms or a specific piece? In other words, what sorts of game do authors play—and how do editors respond?⁽³⁾

Are the editors of some journals—and the referees whose advice they seek—more stringent than others? If so, does this reflect the journals’ ‘quality’—that is, the operation of absolute standards? Or are those standards relative, given the constraints of page numbers and the desire not to create too long a queue of papers accepted for publication (which might be counterproductive)?⁽⁴⁾ There may be times when editors move the publish–reject boundary slightly because of pressures on space—although over the last decade the pressure has usually been too much rather than too little material, and a common reaction (certainly so among the ‘top’ human geography journals listed above) has been to increase the number of pages per annum, and in many cases the number of issues too. This may indicate that more ‘top-quality’ material is being submitted—in part a reflection of the greater pressures to publish in such journals and the increased number of academics involved in the ‘publications rat race’. Or it may just indicate that authors want (feel obliged) to publish in certain journals accepted as being of the highest rank with international reputations and stringent refereeing standards: how often do such phrases appear in reports on appointment and promotion cases?!

And how about referees? Are they more stringent when they receive a paper from journal *X* than they would be if the same paper came from journal *Y*? Or do they

⁽³⁾ Economists have developed models to evaluate the trade-off between publishing in ‘domestic’ and ‘international’ journals (Faria, 2005).

⁽⁴⁾ Some journals now put all accepted papers on their website, thus allowing the length of the queue to be assessed, and some allow authors to trace the progress of their papers through the whole publication process.

apply common standards wherever they receive a manuscript from, and it is then over to the editorial judgment? Journal *X* may accept the paper only if all three reports say ‘publish with minimum changes’: journal *Y*’s editors, on the other hand, may accept it with one grudging ‘publish’, one ‘publish if substantially revised’, and a third saying ‘reject’. Counterfactuals galore!

Charisma/status and audience

Why do authors want to publish in ‘top-level’ journals? Is it just for the charisma and status this will bring—it looks good on their cvs and in department reports? This certainly appears to be the case in some disciplines. In economics, for example, publication in a prestigious journal is a *sine qua non* of status: authors will work through several versions of a paper over at least a year and then wait a further year or more for it to be published in the *American Economic Review* (*AER*), for example.⁽⁵⁾ By the time the paper appears in print it may well be obsolescent. Many people will have been citing the version that the authors placed on their website months if not years previously. They get their audience that way, with ‘clearing houses’ providing easy access to such on-line publications.⁽⁶⁾ The paper’s appearance in a ‘top journal’ is the icing on the cake: it brings the status but not the audience (though, of course, once out the published version gets the citations rather than the website working paper!)

Along with the charisma/status of publishing in a prestigious outlet, however, there is the issue of audience. Academics want their papers to be read and then cited, to be used as exemplars in later works.⁽⁷⁾ Thus they are unlikely to choose to put a paper in an outlet where it will not reach the desired readership.

But how does getting a paper in *E&PA*, or a similar ‘high-status’ journal, ensure that they connect with their audience? Are their peers more likely to look at *E&PA* than many other journals? Certainly more don’t buy it: not surprisingly, only a very small handful subscribe to a monthly journal which may not be expensive on many criteria (but the criteria don’t include the average academic’s salary!) Furthermore, a general journal such as *E&PA* and several of the others in the lists above carries a wide range of papers, most of which will have little or no interest to any one reader—and thus not be an encouragement to purchase it.

Indeed, very few journals attract large individual subscriptions, and only those published by learned societies and distributed free to their members reach many academics’ desks (or shelves?!) So the important performance indicator may be the number of university libraries subscribing to the journal. Are journals accessed and citations obtained by visiting the library regularly and scanning the tables of contents of selected journals where papers you are likely to be interested in are mainly published? Perhaps so in the past. Now, however, most journals are available in electronic as well as hard-copy versions and the number of academics who go to libraries to consult the recent journals is declining rapidly: indeed, increasingly libraries are subscribing to the electronic version only. Furthermore, many academics now subscribe to e-mail services delivering journal ‘tables of contents’ to their desk-top. They no longer go to libraries to find references, the references come to them; and Google[®] or another search engine can soon help them fill the gaps. They then search the web for the paper they want, and unless it appears in a relatively obscure journal they can undoubtedly get a pdf fairly quickly (very often from the author). As long as a paper can be accessed

⁽⁵⁾ Interestingly, the papers appearing in the *AER* have been subjected to a pair of stinging critiques for their methodological failings (McCloskey and Ziliak, 1996; Ziliak and McCloskey, 2004).

⁽⁶⁾ See, for example, <http://econpapers.hhs.se/>.

⁽⁷⁾ Of course, there is always the possibility that they will get a lot of citations for negative reasons: the paper is widely attacked for faults in its argument, or methods, or both.

through the web, relevant readers should be able to find what you have written. So, a crucial criterion when academics are deciding where to send a paper to is simply 'is it accessible?'

Accessibility for many authors might imply a particular audience, perhaps a clearly-defined subfield either within a discipline or across a number of subdisciplinary boundaries, or else a 'user community'. An increasing number of such journals has been launched over the last two decades, many very focused in their content and readership. Although clearly successful—almost none has failed, in human geography and related fields—these are not the most popular, as shown by the contents of the lists quoted earlier. Human geography journals can be placed in five categories: (1) long-established, learned society journals; (2) well-established journals with relatively wide remits (in which I include *E&PA* and *E&PD*, plus *Geoforum*, *Regional Studies*,⁽⁸⁾ and *Urban Studies*); (3) journals with a specific remit but which range widely within the discipline (for example, *Progress in Human Geography*); (4) established journals—such as *Economic Geography*, *Journal of Historical Geography*, and *Political Geography*—serving substantial subfields; and (5) journals (both established and recently launched) serving smaller subfields, some of which may grow over the next decade or so and enter the preceding category. Other disciplines have similar categorisations, and geographers occasionally seek to widen their interdisciplinary audiences by publishing there too.

Most academics work in small communities only, which Geertz (1983) has likened to villages. These are amalgamated into disciplines, larger groups of practitioners with some common interests and training, although the residents of many of the 'villages'—especially those within 'geography'—appear to have stronger links to villagers within the sphere of interest of another parent discipline than to their own! Many of those communities have their own 'house journals', specialised outlets aimed at relatively small but coherent audiences. Some authors will place much of their work in such outlets, readily reaching their peers. Occasionally, they will send a piece to a more general journal: because they think it has a wider potential audience; or because they want (or have been told they should have) the charisma/status associated with publication in a journal with a wider circulation (and thereby possibly contact a potential 'new' audience),⁽⁹⁾ more papers appearing annually, more citations and higher impact factors; or because they want a wider portfolio of publications, rather than putting everything in a small number of specialised outlets. But are those papers any 'better' than the ones that they put in the more specialist outlets? And are they more widely read and cited?⁽¹⁰⁾

A characteristic of all of the journals included in the lists cited earlier is that they are well established and have responded to pressures in recent years by expanding their size. Only two in the two lists of fourteen above were launched as late as the 1980s. What appears to have happened is that many of the longest established journals—those published by the learned societies before the post-1950s expansion of academia—have been seen as the most prestigious outlets, simply because of

⁽⁸⁾ *Regional Studies*, of course, is the 'house journal' of a society with large numbers of both academic and user members.

⁽⁹⁾ One possible benefit of putting a paper in a journal published by a learned society and distributed to its membership is the 'serendipitous reading': an article appears on one's desk and looks interesting enough to read—perhaps when commuting home that night on the train or bus—even though it is outside one's usual scope. And then it might get cited!

⁽¹⁰⁾ Those specialist journals do not make the 'top-rank' lists because they serve limited audiences—always assuming that ISI thinks they are important enough to be included in its database.

their age and wide circulations.⁽¹¹⁾ They were then joined by journals which attracted a reputation relatively soon after they were founded, and have since come to attract large numbers of papers. Both of the above types have wide ‘name recognition’, even among geographers who never publish in them. More recently established specialised journals have been unable to break into the ‘top league’, however, although those which focused on a specific but relatively small audience only have won deserved reputations within their ‘village communities’.

So, the hierarchy is largely a product of inertia? The journals on which human geographers focus much of their work are those with initial advantage. They were there: we got used to publishing in them and we encouraged those who followed us to do likewise. They became the ‘journals of choice’, and when we became obsessed with citations, impact factors, and so forth, publishing in them became the badge of status. Other journals were founded to cope with the greater production of published work. A small number broke into the top levels of the hierarchy, but most remained on the periphery: the ‘village newspapers’ rather than the ‘urban broadsheets’, providing a necessary and excellent service for their defined market.

How should individual journals respond?

E&PA was founded in 1969 and quickly became established as a reputable journal. It was launched as an *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*—although this subtitle was later dropped (though not because there was another journal, launched a decade later, which used that as its title: the phrase still appears as a descriptor in the first sentence of the ‘Notes for authors’!) From the first issue it always carried a wide range of material. Relatively little of it has been about the *environment*, however (unless that term is very broadly conceived), and there has not been much more about *planning*.

So do authors choose *E&PA* because of the company their papers will keep? I doubt it.⁽¹²⁾ Is it because of the academic orientation of the editors? Although it has always maintained that it is an interdisciplinary social science journal, nevertheless *E&PA* is very closely associated with one discipline in most minds—human geography. All but one of its editors have been either trained as geographers (to PhD level), for example, or have practised as geographers within the academic division of labour. Does this matter? Certainly relatively few manuscripts are received from authors in the other main social science disciplines—either established academics or those seeking to become established. Publishing in *E&PA* is not a prestigious thing to do if you are striving for a career in social science’s ‘core’ disciplines of economics, sociology, or political science, though it may be if you are in more ‘peripheral’ disciplines, such as those associated with spatial planning.

Nor are people in those ‘core’ social science disciplines very aware of material published in *E&PA* by others, however relevant it might be to their own research. Despite the modern aids to reference finding, many academics continue to operate within their own disciplinary enclaves—with, for example, their own citation and

⁽¹¹⁾ There are exceptions to this. *The Geographical Journal* did not have the status of *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* for several decades. After the IBG–RGS merger of the mid-1990s, the *GJ* has been ‘repackaged’ and aimed at a particular audience—those interested in society–environment interactions—and is gaining a higher status accordingly. *The Geographical Review* was similarly associated with a society perceived as moribund by many academics, and has failed to attract highly cited articles (as well as failing to meet its publishing schedules).

⁽¹²⁾ Which raises an associated question for editors—“Do special issues attract more readers for individual papers than would be the case if the same papers were published in ‘conventional’ issues of the journals among other neighbours?”

search tools, such as EconLit which covers over 400 journals for that discipline alone.⁽¹³⁾ Geographers may be less prone to that than others—certainly an informal input–output analysis of citations in the leading journals of social science disciplines indicates that geographers are net importers; we cite work from other disciplines much more than they cite ours (on which, see Johnston, 2003).

For most authors, a crucial feature of a preferred journal is that they get a relatively quick decision on their paper, and then don't have to wait many months for it to appear (although increasingly they make the paper available on a website so it can be read by those interested and able to find it). Editorial practice—in which there are massive variations in speed of response—is then crucial, alongside frequency of publication. Most of the journals listed above appear six times a year or more—though whether this is cause or effect of their standing is uncertain. So perhaps editorial practice as much as anything else determines whether authors send their 'best papers' to *E&PA* rather than another 'prestigious outlet'.

I guess the real answer to most of the questions I have posed here is that we don't know: my contentions are just that—untested hypotheses! So much of academic practice is unclear. Does it matter? As long as good material is published, and the journal in which it appears is generally available, will its impact vary? Would a paper published in *E&PA* reach a smaller audience and have less impact if it appeared instead in a 'less prestigious', smaller circulation journal? Is the experiment feasible? My experience is that within human geography most practitioners become quickly aware of relevant work published by their peers, wherever it appears. The problem, as already noted, is with interdisciplinary awareness.

And how should editors of journals such as *E&PA* react? Should they, for example, focus on 'cutting-edge' research—whatever that might be? The distinction between 'cutting-edge' papers and those which might be termed 'normal science' is, I believe, unfortunate. The former may promulgate new ideas, but unless these are followed up by 'normal science' they may never be more than that—although they may well be cited as if they have greater import than the available evidence sustains. (A very Popperian stance, I realise! Of course, a key identifying characteristic of science is that its findings are replicable.) In any case, many 'normal science' papers include new ideas as they take knowledge forwards: innovation and novelty are defined in many different ways. And do we want two types of journals—one for the thinkers and another for the doers? In the twenty-five years I have been involved with *E&PA* I certainly have never rejected a paper because it was not cutting-edge enough, and would hate to feel that it—or any other journal—took that position. The key criterion for publishability must be the quality of the work done and its reporting: it can be entirely original without being 'cutting-edge'—to the extent that I understand what cutting-edge is.

Basically, the message for editors of the 'top-rank' journals appears to be that there is a lot of good material out there, much of it is being submitted to you, and as long as you go on making decisions in reasonable time, the publication queue for accepted papers is no more than a year, your journal is available electronically, and its table of contents is widely distributed electronically, then keep going as you are. You are providing an excellent service: there may be peaks and troughs in the submission of material but nothing more—and should you really be bothered about your journal's position in yet another spurious league table? And for the editors of other journals, which haven't reached the dizzy heights of the 'top fourteen', the message may be just

⁽¹³⁾ See <http://arc.uk.ovid.com:8590/webspirs/start.ws?customer=bri>. PsychInfo, on the same search engine, covers 1300 periodicals in twenty-four languages.

the same. You too are providing an excellent service for members of a relatively small ‘village community’—which may itself eventually reach urban status. Keep up the good work too!

In other words, while all is certainly not well within academia, there is not a lot to be concerned with—at least for human geographers and others who use *E&PA* as an outlet and as a resource to be searched for good material—with regard to its journals. Authors play their own games with regard to where they send papers; editors respond to them on the straightforward criterion of academic excellence;⁽¹⁴⁾ and knowledge continues to be circulated and advanced. Or perhaps others think differently...

Envoi/au revoir

If you do think differently, I’m sure the editors of *E&PA* will be delighted to hear from you and to host a debate about the nature and future of journals. By then, I will have moved ‘out’ (it is probably too late to say ‘on’). Editing *E&PA* has been a great pleasure, not least for the large number of people it has brought me into contact with as authors and referees, and the wide range of material that I would otherwise probably not have read: I have benefited greatly from the whole process. I could not have done so, however, without the support and help of many others. I am eternally grateful to Alan Wilson for inviting me to join the editorial team and to Nigel Thrift, who joined at the same time in 1979 and with whom I have worked closely since he became Managing Editor: my other coeditors too have been always supportive and highly congenial colleagues. At Pion, my debt—like our collective debt—to John Ashby is great; he was a publisher who was not only interested in what his journals included but was hands-on and innovative in a variety of ways. (I recall him in 1994 pressing us to move to twenty-four issues a year.) Jan Schubert, too, has been a tower of strength, keeping the journal moving forward and the issues coming out on time with only a tiny number of errors. Finally, the manifold tasks of being an editor would have been much more taxing of time and energy without the work of Joan Dunn for ten years when I was at Sheffield and, since then, Ros Whitehead, whose unflappable efficiency has created order out of a complex and potentially chaotic flow of material—increasingly electronic. To all, many thanks for an exciting component of my career.

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⁽¹⁴⁾ We hope! I know of examples—from personal experience—where editors have had to deal with referees’ reports which (wilfully, I’m sure) have misrepresented at least part of what a paper is trying to do because it is at variance with their favoured ideas.