Author-Friendly Journal Websites

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How long can I expect the review process to take? What is the journal's acceptance rate? If the paper receives a "revise and resubmit" decision, what are my chances of having the revised version accepted? These questions are commonly asked by prospective authors in the field of sociology, and I suspect that in many other fields as well.

I would like to suggest that journal webpages routinely provide answers to these and related questions in real time. The relevant information is readily available in manuscript submission systems commonly used by journal publishers. Indeed, a few journals – noted below – already provide some of this information on selected journal websites. Reports required by publication committees also include some of this information but these documents are not widely known, are not easily accessed and are typically quite dated.

Data on decision times and acceptance rates would greatly aid authors in their choice of journals. Moreover, it would help to level the playing field between those who are "in the know" or who have access to those who are knowledgeable about the review process for particular journals and those who find themselves in the role of outsiders. Finally, making this information routinely available might have the salutary effect of improving review times and standardizing other practices that vary significantly across journals and between editors of the same journal.

Selecting Journals in Sociology

As a former journal editor, students and colleagues often ask me for advice regarding which journal would be most appropriate for particular manuscripts. Sociologists often have a number of options to consider. The InCites Journal Citation Reports (Clarivate Analytics, 2020) current list 148 sociology journals. This list surely understates the set of journals sociologists consider for their scholarship. That is because there are many journals in specialty areas that spill over the boundaries of ISI categories (such as criminology, demography, educational policy, ethnic and racial studies, management and organizations, public administration, public health, and women's and gender studies). And the ISI Journal Citation Reports do not include all social-science journals.[1]

Given the specialized domains of many journals and the paper's substantive focus, however, the choice set facing any author for a specific paper is much narrower. In addition to a good "fit" between the paper and the journal, there are several relevant considerations. One dimension is "generalist" versus "specialist" journals; another is the prestige of the journal. In sociology, there are three or four high-status generalist journals, along with a second tier of generalist journals. The choice between a top-tier generalist journal and a top-tier specialist journal can be a difficult one; journal choices continue to be complex in the event that the paper is not accepted during the first submission attempt.

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[1] The Population Studies Center at the University of Michigan (2020) lists 386 journals that may be of interest to social scientists. This list is not comprehensive for sociology, and includes a number of journals in public health as well as economics. For more on the specialization of subfields within sociology, see Jacobs (2014), Chapter 3.

A second set of issues that concern authors are the likelihood of acceptance and the length of the review process. The top journals in sociology publish only a small fraction of submitted manuscripts: the *American Sociological Review* accepts less than 10 percent of submitted papers (American Sociological Association, 2019). Submission rates have grown so much that some top journals are rejecting a considerable fraction of papers without peer review. The decision to try for top journal thus means that an author is likely to need multiple submissions before a paper finds a home.[2] Moreover, sociology papers are rarely accepted "as is." A positive first review involves a request by the editor to "revise and resubmit" (R&R) the manuscript. In other words, in the best of circumstances there are two rounds of review.

The time between submission and decision is thus an important consideration. This review time varies considerably across journals. Compared to most of its peers, the *American Sociological Review* is prompt and efficient: favorable (R&R) decisions delivered in 2018 took about 2 months (8.7 weeks) on average. Authors who submitted their papers to *Sociological Theory*, in contrast, had to wait almost twice as long (17.1 weeks). (These statistics are reported in American Sociological Association, 2019).

While authors are always happy to see their work published expeditiously, there are particular career stages when a prompt acceptance decision is particularly valuable. Graduate students who seek a faculty position are especially keen to land a timely acceptance letter. A similar focus on the publication clock holds for post-doctoral fellows and those who are being reviewed for promotion or tenure. Timely decisions in these cases can make or break careers.

While information on decision times and acceptance rates can be obtained for nine journals published by the American Sociological Association, it is not included on the journal websites. The report that is eventually included in the Association's newsletter (*Footnotes*) is typically somewhat dated, since new editors may have come on line, and individual editorial regimes can differ in their efficiency and decision-making strategies. And similar information cannot be easily obtained for the many other publication options. This scarcity of official information leads authors to seek guidance from their personal networks and academic advisers, as Granovetter's research on the role of social networks has shown. It also leads authors to seek information on the rumor mill.

One sociological blog site includes comments from author on their experiences with the review process (Sociology Job Market Rumors, 2020). The blog does contain some useful information. For example, the review times for the *American Journal of Sociology* can be quite long, and a number of blog entries complain about this pattern. Taken as a whole, however, the information on the sociology "rumor mill" is sadly deficient. It is often quite dated. Information that is several years old may no longer be relevant because many journals select new editors every several years. While journal rankings tend to stay more or less stable over time, new editors can approach issues such how to handle R&R decisions in their own ways.

More importantly, the comments posted to this blog generally do not provide sufficient information to allow a prospective author to know if their paper is similar enough in content, style and quality to be a valuable guide. In other words, while guest ranking the quality of an Air BNB may provide information that is likely to likely to be quite useful to other prospective guests, the heterogeneity of manuscripts

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[2] Azar (2004) estimated that economics papers require 3-6 submissions before a typical paper is published. I am not aware of any similar estimates in the field of sociology.

makes journal commentary less valuable. In my humble opinion, the complaints posted about the review process on the sociology rumor mill provide more in the way of commiseration and less in the way of useful guidance to prospective authors. The Population Studies Center at the University of Michigan (2020) provides some information about many social science journals, but no information is reported in terms of decision times or acceptance rates.

Journal Websites

In recent years, journal websites in sociology have become quite standardized. In addition to the journal's impact factor; it is common to have tabs that list some of the latest articles. Data on the most read and the most cited papers are often also posted.

The standardization of websites is not surprising in light on the consolidation of the journal publishing. A small number of organizations (Sage, Wiley, Taylor & Francis, Springer, Oxford and Elsevier) publish the lion's share of sociology journals. Together, these organizations publish 129 of the 148 journals listed in the JCR journal category (87 percent). Three firms -- Sage (53), Taylor & Francis (25) and Wiley (22) -- together publish 74 percent of JCR indexed sociology journal titles. A decision by any of these firms to revamp the websites for the journals would quickly lead to a new standard the field.

One firm – Springer – now includes review times on its web pages for selected journals. Authors who are considering submission to *Human Ecology*, *Human Studies*, *Qualitative Sociology*, *Race and Social Problems*, *Review of Religious Research*, and *Social Indicators Research* are treated to current information on review times and time to publication.[3]

In the case of *Qualitative Sociology*, the good news is that it takes an average of less than two months (53 days) before a first decision is made. The bad news is that it takes more than a year and a half (522 days) between initial submission and publication for those manuscripts successfully wind their way through the review process. Unfortunately, authors are not provided with information about the acceptance rate, the proportion of papers that receive R&R decisions, the proportion of papers that receive a second R&R decision, the number of papers (if any) that do not receive a complete review process, and so on.

The data needed to provide all of these statistics are embedded in the electronic manuscript submission systems – such as Scholar One and Orcid – that have become ubiquitous. In other words, making journal websites more author friendly would not require any additional time and effort on the part of journal editors. Publishers that seek to provide a full range of services to authors could make a significant step forward by making information on acceptance rates and decision times available to authors.

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[3] Springer has not (at least not yet) provided this information for other noteworthy journals, such as *Demography*, *Theory & Society*, and *The American Sociologist*.

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