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The Case for an Activist Editorial Model

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We have all heard complaints about the journal review process. One common grievance is about a reject decision after multiple rounds of review. "My paper was under review at that journal for three rounds of reviews stretching out over two years before it was finally rejected. It was nearly enough to make me want to hit the bottle." A more frequent, if somewhat less exasperating, refrain from authors is the lack of clarity in how to respond to reviews. "I received four reviews from the journal. The comments were mostly thoughtful but they led in many different directions. Unfortunately, the editor provided no guidance in how best to address these comments." The question I pose in this essay is whether these experiences are inevitable or whether there are editorial models which reduce the likelihood of these and other problematic situations.

The peer review process serves at least two functions: a) to help select among the many manuscripts submitted; and b) to suggest improvements to authors. In this essay I would like to focus on the second of these functions, namely offering constructive advice in the context of a decision to invite the authors to "revise and resubmit" (R&R). I outline a model in which the R&R decision is central to the editorial process. In this approach, the editor plays an active role in guiding the manuscript through the process of revision. Among the goals of this model is the reduction of the number of unsuccessful revisions. I also discuss additional revisions that may be suggested at a second decision point, namely the "conditional accept" stage.

Revisions are ubiquitous

As a practical matter, editors rarely accept a paper on its initial submission. In the three years that I served as editor of the *American Sociological Review* (*ASR*), I accepted one paper after the first round of review out of more than 1,250 new submissions, and even in this case the acceptance was conditional on a number of suggested revisions.

Papers typically arrive in less than perfect shape. Problems range from the need to improve the conceptual clarity of the paper to questions about the data, questions about whether the analyses presented fully match the theoretical claims, gaps in the presentation, and so on.

Why do papers need revision? In some cases it is due to the pressures on our system of careers. Assistant professors find themselves under tremendous pressure to publish. Indeed, publications by graduate students are now the norm among those competing for the most sought-after positions. Less-than-perfect submissions, then, can be understood as a by-product of the pressure to fill out curricula vitae.

But there is another, deeper reason, namely that cutting-edge work is by its nature uncertain. Authors may not fully apprehend the true nature of their innovations or the full implications of their findings. In ideal circumstances, the collective wisdom of editors and reviewers can help authors develop their contributions most effectively without overstating their claims.

A final consideration is that the social sciences are characterized by multiple and competing paradigms, and that successfully addressing disparate audiences is a fundamentally challenging endeavor.

As a general rule, I suspect that the more ambitious the paper, the more fundamental the contribution, the more likely that revisions can be helpful. In other words, straightforward research reports are less likely to require as much time and energy to revise as papers that are more ambitious conceptually and empirically.

In my experience, manuscripts may warrant an R&R decision in four situations:

a) the paper has promise but there are various concerns about the presentation and the evidence presented;
b) there are questions about whether the central claims of the paper are adequately supported;
c) there are conceptual ambiguities which need to be resolved before the paper can be published; and
d) the paper is basically acceptable, but there is room for a variety of improvements.

In some cases, the revision process is really about whether the paper can overcome certain challenges. Can the author really more effectively prove the central point? Can the argument succeed at the conceptual level? The course of the revision process will depend on the nature of the issues that need to be addressed.

In a relatively small number of cases, while papers are publishable as submitted, reviewers with expertise in the subject matter at hand are often in a position to suggest a variety of substantive enhancements, large and small. These may include the correction of factually inaccurate statements

and the incorporation of neglected references, or they may represent conceptual or methodological improvements. An editor may feel that the author is likely to take the opportunity to revise more seriously with an R&R decision, where the final acceptance of the paper remains uncertain, than with a "conditional accept" decision. Thus, an R&R decision can serve as insurance against an author who might resist requests for further work once the paper has been accepted. In a small number of cases, then, an editor may opt for an R&R decision even when the paper makes a significant scholarly contribution in its current state.

The first R&R as the key decision point

In the editorial model I am suggesting, the first R&R decision is the key decision point. In this approach, the editor reads the paper and the reviews carefully at this stage before making a decision. The editor should be satisfied that the reviews are informative, cover the main issues, and are not limited to one aspect of the paper or one angle of vision. The editor provides detailed advice on what is expected in a revised paper. The goal is to minimize false positives, that is, encouraging authors to revise papers that ultimately will be rejected. Having one's paper rejected, after revisions have been undertaken, is painful for authors. It also takes up a lot of scholar's time, can generate substantially more work for reviewers who are asked to assess multiple revisions, and can considerably delay the eventual publication of a paper.

The other advantage to this approach is to maximize the chances of publishing significant contributions. As a result of a careful review at the R&R stage, the editor is likely to see more clearly what the potential of the paper is likely to be and will also get a sense of how best to advise authors. In other words, this approach benefits the journal as well as reducing the risks to the authors.

It may be useful to contrast this approach to other ways of managing the review process. As an author, I have received decision letters from editors with very little guidance other than that indicated in the reviews. Unfortunately, this approach is quite common. It no doubt reflects the time pressures faced by editors, resulting from the constant flow of manuscripts across their desks. The problem with this approach is that authors are often uncertain about how to proceed. As I discuss in more detail below, it is not uncommon for reviews to disagree on many key points. The lack of clarity from the editor can lead to extra time, extra guess work and, in many cases, unsuccessful revisions.

Another way that my approach differs from common practice is that I often did not solicit a second round of reviews. There are many potential issues that can arise in a second round of reviews. Sometimes one or more of the original reviewers is unavailable. Sometimes new reviewers raise entirely new sets of concerns. A second round of reviews inevitably delays the decision for at least a month and often much longer. In my approach, if I had studied the paper and the first set of reviews carefully, if I had a clear vision of what the contribution of the paper is, or could be, and what I am expecting a revised paper to look like, I was usually in a position to assess whether the revisions have been successful. I sometimes solicited a prompt second opinion from a deputy editor, but this would often be on an expedited schedule. If the revisions seemed to me unsatisfactory or superficial, I would often solicit one or more reviews in order to help justify the decision to the authors.

I came to this approach fairly quickly in my term as editor, based, in part, on my prior dealings with editors and, in part, on mistakes I made early on. For example, there was an occasion in which I commissioned an R&R without reading the paper carefully enough at first submission. The result was that I discovered serious issues with the paper only after the revisions had arrived. I then found myself in a quandary: was I obligated to publish the paper because the authors had addressed the issues that had been raised by the revisions, even though I had serious qualms about the revised product? Had I read the paper more carefully at the R&R stage, it is likely that I would have noticed some of these problems earlier.

The difference in stance between the editor and the reviewer needs to be understood. The reviewers are trying to make a case for their particular understanding of the paper. They don't know what the editor might think, and they don't know who the other reviewers might be. The editor has a clear advantage in seeing a set of reviews so that he or she can weigh the common concerns as well as the issues raised in a more idiosyncratic way by individual readers. Thus, there is a difference between the role of a reviewer and the role of an editor in establishing the direction for the revisions.

Guiding the review process

Given the centrality of revisions to successful journal publication, the process of revision is one of the central academic dramas. What does the editor really expect? What issues need to be addressed head-on and which can be finessed? In my view, the more clarity that editors can provide, the more this process is likely to be constructive and the less likely that authors and reviewers would find themselves in intense conflict.

It is often the case that reviewers diverge in their assessment of a paper. Sometimes, it is not possible to follow the advice of all of the reviewers because disagreements between them on the value of the study are evident. An urgent concern here results when two or more reviewers feel the paper has considerable promise but disagree on the direction that the revisions should pursue. For example, one reviewer may see the key contribution as

empirical while another reviewer feels that the central advance is more conceptual in nature. In other cases, all agree that the empirical contribution is key, but differ on what the key conclusions are and what features of the analysis should be highlighted. What is the poor author to do when confronted with such conflicting advice?

Some editors resolve the matter by urging the author to pay special attention to the comments of a particular reviewer. This kind of editorial intervention is certainly helpful in providing guidance to the author. My suggestion is that the editor (or a deputy editor) write a letter outlining the key issues that need to be resolved. An editorial letter outlining a specific roadmap for the author to follow in revising the paper draws on the reviewers' concerns but often raises additional issues that may be seen from an editorial vantage point. I ask questions about issues that don't make sense to me. I point out gaps in the argument, additional analyses that might be useful, and stylistic suggestions that seem appropriate. I feel that I can stand for the general reader, and whatever I might lack in detailed knowledge of the author's specialty area I make up in experience in reading a wide range of papers.

The goal is to give the author a clear set of directions for revising. This does not mean that the author is obligated to write the paper that I would like to see written. It is often the case that authors respond in a memo that they feel I am leading them astray on one or more points. But the more common reaction is appreciation for the careful reading of the paper. If my queries and suggestions are not always on target, more often than not, they highlight areas of ambiguity where more careful writing is in order.

Despite this editorial guidance, not all authors successfully revise their papers. There is considerable variability in the ability of authors to apprehend the points being raised by the reviews and the editor and to respond to them effectively.

In my experience, disagreements about the conceptual framing of the paper are the most challenging issues. In most cases, there is a lack of precision in the manuscript that allows different readers to literally see different papers in the same manuscript. In some cases, this really represents the reviewer's desire that the author make a different point. It is difficult to discern what the empirical core of the paper should look like when there is uncertainty about the conceptual framing. Perhaps for this reason, papers requiring significant work on the conceptual issues are often at the highest risk for failing at the revision stage.

Careful reading of papers at the R&R stage takes a considerable amount of time. There are at least two ways to keep these demands under control. The first is to limit the number of R&R decisions. In the approach I am suggesting, an R&R decision represents a significant investment of time on the part of the editor, and a degree of commitment to the authors. The yield, or rate at which R&Rs are converted into actual publications, should be quite high. For example, there were 431 new manuscripts submitted to the *ASR* during 2004. I invited 56 R&Rs, for an R&R rate of 13 percent. Of these 56, 38 have been accepted and published, 11 were subsequently rejected, and seven had not been resubmitted when my term as editor ended. If you view 38/56 as the yield rate, the fraction is 68 percent of R&Rs that were eventually published. If you compare 38 accepts to 11 rejects, the yield is 38/49 or 78 percent. The overall acceptance rate was 38/431 or 9 percent.

Second, this task can be delegated to deputy editors. However, this requires willingness to delegate and availability of deputy editors with common vision. In some cases, I took the unusual approach of designating deputy editors for a single paper. In other words, an editorial board member (or simply a prominent scholar with expertise on the topics addressed in the manuscript) can be asked to synthesize the reviews and provide the author with an outline of the key revisions that need to be undertaken in order to successfully revise the paper. In one case, a "designated deputy" had recently edited a book on the topic in question. Sometimes I asked the reviewer with the clearest insights and most useful comments to write a synthesis of the reviews.

Edits at the conditional accept stage

I tried as often as possible to read the revised manuscript as soon as it arrived. Having read the manuscript closely at the R&R stage, and having weighed the comments of the reviewers, I generally had a good idea of what would constitute an acceptable revision. If the revision was acceptable, we would move to the conditional accept stage pronto. If there was some uncertainty about the verdict, I would solicit a second round of reviews.

I read the revised manuscript closely, and often had a number of suggestions (or requirements) for the third and final draft. These would be incorporated into a "conditional accept" letter. Since authors often received the conditional accept right after the revision was submitted, they were often happy to do one more round of polishing. The authors were often in a position to maintain their intense focus on the paper. Their revisions often went through several iterations, and my prompt feedback simply represented a final iteration in the evolution of the paper.

One issue frequently addressed at this stage is the length of the paper. At the R&R stage, I sometimes explicitly told authors not to worry about the length of the paper "for now." The concern here is that the author will guess wrong and cut out things that should be left in. In other cases, I explicitly advised the authors to lengthen the paper. This allowed me to see whether the substantive issues could all be addressed in one place at one time. It is far easier to suggest cuts in length once the substantive contributions of the paper are clear. Once the paper has been conditionally accepted, I tried to be as explicit as possible about the extent and the location of cuts.

Suggestions regarding the title of the paper are sometimes an issue at the conditional accept stage. Long, awkward and uninviting paper titles are all too common. Titles should make it clear what the paper is about, but succinct, inviting, and intriguing titles increase readers' interest in the journal. Again, recommendations regarding the title are most likely to be successful once the key contributions of the paper are fully established.

I often encouraged authors to write the most user-friendly abstracts possible. In other words, authors typically seek to explain the essential contributions of a paper in an abstract. However, it also makes sense to try to entice as many readers as possible with the abstract, which is likely to be read by many more people than the paper itself. Thus, there can be some tension between speaking precisely to an audience of specialists and speaking clearly to a wider audience of general readers. This tension may be more acute for a generalist journal such as *ASR*, but I suspect that the same issues are likely to arise for specialist journals as well.

The conditional accept stage is when I review the tables closely. Are there tables that could be condensed or eliminated? Are there too many figures? Are those that remain used to optimal effect? Again, these are issues of polishing the final draft that only make sense to address once the contributions of the paper have been established and the overall form of the paper is clear.

During my tenure as editor of *ASR*, we instituted the practice of making supplemental material available on the *ASR* website. The idea here is to make the articles more accessible to the general reader while still providing the detailed information needed by the specialist reader. Data appendices, supplemental tables and figures, and discussion of side issues can be made available to readers in an electronic form. This makes this material more accessible and more permanent than the traditional approach, where authors indicate that additional results are not shown but available from the author. We currently have a ten-page maximum length on website supplements so that authors are not tempted to use this as a space for dumping large quantities of unedited computer output.

Another standard item on my checklist at the conditional accept stage is examining the footnotes. It is common for papers to have too many long footnotes. In many cases this material can be incorporated into the text; in other cases the material can be eliminated.

I often encouraged an author to more fully develop one or two additional issues, typically in the conclusion. The goal is to invite the author to take their argument to the next level, to make the paper the best that it can be. These are sometimes couched as "suggestions" but in some cases they really are conditions. I have had occasion to go back and forth with an author more than once at the conditional accept stage over such issues.

This extra attention at the conditional accept stage means that the copyediting stage should go smoothly. In other words, the tables and figures are largely set, the author has had the chance to read the paper over and to address matters of presentation and substance, and thus there is less justification for authors to rewrite the paper at the copyediting stage.

Objections considered

It may be helpful to consider several objections to this approach in order to clarify its strengths and potential pitfalls. The first possible objection is that an "activist" editorial model will result in overediting. One might suspect that the editor's ego can become involved in the process. There is always the risk that the editor will insist on the paper taking the form he or she prefers rather than the one that makes the most sense to the author.

While I certainly recognize this as a possibility, in the end I suspect that there may well be less editorial meddling in the activist approach than in a more laissez-faire model. One example comes to mind that is consistent with this reasoning. One paper had undergone two rounds of revisions before it arrived on my desk. At that point, the paper looked like it had been written by a committee. There had been three reviewers' comments plus deputy editor's comments on two rounds of revisions, and the authors had been at pains to try to satisfy all of these reviewers as best they could. I worked closely with the authors to streamline their argument. This example demonstrates how authors who are anxious to address every reviewers' concern may end up rewriting much more than is necessary or desirable. A clear editorial voice is likely to result in less editorial interference, not more. This is especially true if clarity at the R&R stage reduces the risk of second and third rounds of revisions.

The editor should not require that every manuscript be all things to all people. Editors have to have a clear sense of what is possible with the data at hand, how many issues can be covered in the space of one paper, what the authors are capable of doing, in short, to make sure that the perfect is not the enemy of the good. Clarity on these issues will likely result in clearer papers and less editing designed to satisfy all reviewers than is the case with a more minimalist editorial model.

A second possible concern is that setting the bar high at the R&R stage will result in discounting good papers. The argument here is that authors are entitled to the chance to revise if their paper holds promise. A variant of this objection is that the most ambitious papers often need the most revision, and too stringent a policy at the R&R stage will result in the publication of only the most routine research reports.

The intent of taking the R&R decision seriously is not to dismiss promising work but rather to increase the chances that this work will make its way to publication. Barring policy changes such as increasing the number of pages available to the journal, in the end the same number of papers will be published. The editor typically does not control the number of pages

available, but he or she does have control over how many R&R decisions are made. The question is whether it is in the general interest to have many scholars revising papers and many reviewers re-reading these papers when the likelihood of publication is low. A tremendous amount of time and effort is put forth by scholars in revising their work and in reviewing revised papers. If too many of these are doomed to failure, then much of this work may be for naught.

Editors must, of course, be on the lookout for promising work that is not yet fully formed. But there is a danger here as well. It is often difficult to discern what the final product will look like when the first draft lacks theoretical clarity. Here again, I see virtue in an activist orientation. Indeed, papers requiring substantial work need an especially strong editorial hand. These are the papers that are most likely to provoke divergent reviews. In such situations, there is all the more reason for the editor to give the author a clear roadmap for revisions.

A more serious risk is that the editor might set the bar so high at the R&R stage that there are not enough papers remaining to fill the journal. Not all authors will revise their papers on a timely schedule; not all will be able to overcome the challenges laid out by the reviewers and the editor. It is unrealistic to shoot for a yield of 100, that is, a ratio of 1.00 between R&Rs and published papers. As noted above, in my experience, a yield of 2/3rds or 3/4ths is more realistic. Thus, the editor must make sure that enough R&Rs are commissioned to insure an adequate flow of papers.

A fourth concern is that this approach might takes too much of the editor's time. It is undoubtedly the case that reading papers closely at the R&R stage and providing detailed feedback to authors is a time-consuming endeavor. Some of this work can be delegated to deputy editors, but there are clearly limits to how much delegation is practical. On the other hand, getting stacks of revised papers that are not destined to succeed generates substantial work as well. Thus, the activist editorial model, while demanding, may not involve that much more work in the end than the more laissez-faire approach.

Conclusion

I have endeavored to make the case for an "activist" editorial model that focuses considerable time and attention on the initial decision to invite a revised version of the manuscript for consideration. I contrast this approach to a more laissez-faire or minimalist approach to editing.

The essay began with two common complaints from authors: one in which a paper is rejected after multiple rounds of review, and a second where the author is at sea with respect to the best way to address a variety of conflicting advice of variable quality. I maintain that clear and specific

guidance from editors at the R&R stage is likely to reduce both of these common ailments in the peer review process.

I also suggest the virtues of a careful reading of the paper at the "conditional accept" stage, since many important matters of style and presentation can be enhanced at this stage in the process.

The editorial model suggested here is quite time intensive. The editor reads papers carefully at least twice. In order to pursue this approach, the editor needs sufficient release time from teaching. The editor needs to select deputy editors with same general vision regarding the importance of guiding the review process. Editors need a solid manuscript-tracking system and a strong staff so that they do not spend all of their time managing the review process. If editors can focus on key task.of selecting papers with most potential and working with the authors to bring out the best in these papers, they will find the role to be richly rewarding.

Opening the Black Box of Editorship

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