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# Forum

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## The State of Scholarly Publishing

To the Editor:

Two recent Editor's Columns in *PMLA* (109 [1994]: 7–13; 183–86) reveal several of the many abuses of scholarly publishing, abuses that leave everyone—authors, editors, readers—frustrated, confused, and angry. Having worked as a scholar and as an editor of both the *Wordsworth Circle* and several monograph series over the past twenty-five years, I believe that the situation is indeed critical. On the one hand, editors are inundated with manuscripts—many of them serial if not multiple submissions—and, on the other, readership is declining. As the MLA survey indicates (183), many scholars producing the flood of material do not read the journals they want to publish in. And that is the main reason most submissions never reach publication: they display no sense of audience or context, no relation to the long conversation that scholarship and criticism represent in our discipline. Many are written not for that conversation but for a reward system that is largely irrelevant to publishing. Most are written for jobs, tenure, promotion, grants, or released time—trophies for which the authors might as well have entered a dance contest or a tennis match. Indeed, any other measure of achievement would be as appropriate as submitting work to a learned journal the author does not read.

Overwhelmed by an excess of inappropriate submissions by well-meaning but misguided authors, we are unable to do what we do best: publish; disseminate knowledge and current thought; stimulate research; provide a forum; create community; evaluate, represent, record, define, and communicate what is important to the areas our journals serve. Through dialogue and review (which are what the peer review system does best), learned journals promote the values, goals, ideals, and standards of those who affiliate themselves with the profession through the journal. Much of our work is tutorial: developing the voices of the future, bringing young authors beyond their graduate school development and before the international audience that most journals now address, an audience that extends into the future at least 250 years, thanks to acid-free paper. While this tutorial function takes up at least a third of most editors' time, it has nothing to do with issues of employment, salary, and teaching load. To use the peer review system to make personnel decisions is self-defeating, wasteful, and inappropriate.

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Editors not only serve audiences but also create them. But because scholarly publication is perceived primarily as a means of gaining rewards rather than of communicating, the role of the true audience, paying and participating, has certainly declined. In the 1970s, when many of the great and lasting journals were founded, it was, I recall, common to subscribe to the journal in one's field, to read it, and to respond with submissions. While technology has threatened to make learned journals obsolete, in fact it is making audiences obsolete. True, within the reward system, the journal will always have more status than e-mail. But authors, assisted by technology, can produce more first copies of essays and submit them to more journals—inappropriate essays for journals the authors do not read.

The irony is that, while journals are at the heart of the reward system, they seldom receive any rewards themselves—most are still scratching for support, for recognition, for readers. Authors complain that their submissions are not reviewed or published fast enough; when the essays are published, we primarily hear about the “errors.”

The real crisis for journals is in support. A journal used to be a source of prestige to a department and a center of energy for students. Now, however dependent the employment process is on journals, departments seldom support them, forcing them to increase subscription rates and thus often lose individual readers. But learned journals are still the most economical means of publishing in the humanities, since most of the usually expensive labor—the editing and peer review—is done by volunteers. To have the decisions, which are free, one must have the journals, which are not—or a central clearinghouse that will validate the articles without being obligated to publish them. To keep the journals, the scholars who use them for credentials should subscribe, not just once but throughout their professional lives. And they have to recover the habit of reading whole journals rather than items selected for their immediate needs. Few journals are so random that an offprint is as good as the whole thing; editors consider their major achievements not isolated papers but organic volumes in which each article works in the context of the others. Journals in the humanities, unlike those in the sciences, do not charge authors for publication, and should not have to bear the costs of authors' rewards.

Better authors, more appropriate manuscripts, more support, better readers: these are the same priorities that journals had in the seventies. The fundamental problem then and now is also the same: if the rewards of the profession are going to depend on publication in learned journals, the journals will have to be supported and re-

warded as well, or we shall have to reconsider the whole reward system.

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To the Editor:

When I first read Domna Stanton's January 1994 Editor's Column, “On Multiple Submissions” (109 [1994]: 7–13), it struck me as simply a bit of professional *curiosa*, an unusually clear example of the vogue for marshaling certain fashionable abstractions rather than grappling directly with a question. I also found it strange that Stanton did not more directly dismiss the fallacy of regarding multiple submissions as even a partial solution to the general slowness of the process of refereeing manuscripts. If referees (and often, I fear, editorial offices) appear unable to respond to submissions in a timely fashion, multiplying the number of submissions that editors must process and referees must comment on can be nothing but counterproductive.

But when a concerned graduate student asked me what image of the profession I thought the column gave, I read it again and found myself focusing on the calm acceptance of the situation described by the paragraph beginning “The most often cited justification for multiple submissions is the pressure on scholars to publish and thus to send their manuscripts to as many outlets as possible, especially academics who are beginning their careers or about to undergo tenure and promotion evaluations.” The paragraph goes on to remind us that “[m]any universities require for tenure not only a book and a body of articles but also substantial progress on a second major project” and that, because of the pressure on students to finish their doctorates more quickly, dissertations now “tend to be undigested and unpolished” (8). Although few of us need to be reminded of this aspect of the state of the profession, we perhaps do need to be reminded that it is our responsibility to judge if things are the way they ought to be. It is not that a policy on multiple submissions is unimportant but rather that it deserves much less debate within the MLA than the more fundamental issues of what English departments expect their faculties to devote time to and why.

Buried in the second footnote is another comment that suggests that we indeed need to examine once again the ever-current question of “the function of criticism.” Ursula Franklin's belief that “[i]nitially . . . the purpose of publication was to benefit the readers” is described as “perhaps somewhat naive, a mythical notion that war-