

Publishing Processes in the Academic Marketing Discipline in the United States: A German Perspective

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In writing this invited commentary, I would like to make some remarks on publishing processes in the academic marketing discipline in leading U.S. journals from the perspective of a person whose academic background is not in the United States. My educational and academic roots are in Germany, a country that was recently classified by a U.S. politician as belonging to the “Old Europe.” (This gentleman probably referred to the fact that universities existed in Germany before the United States were even founded.) The German university system is different from the U.S. system in many structural respects, and it has always been interesting for me to observe the two systems and to compare them with each other. In this comment, I also would like to draw on my experience as both a reviewer for academic journals and an author.

An interesting question to start with relates to the motivation of reviewers for academic journals to invest time and energy into doing a good job. As Armstrong (1997) noted, reviewers generally work without extrinsic rewards (besides being visible as members of editorial boards and, at rare occasions, receiving awards). So what motivates reviewers?

My answer to this question is fairly simple: it is my understanding that the activity of reviewing provides an excellent opportunity for learning and improves one's skills as a researcher. As a reviewer, you (ideally) have no self-interest at all. I tend to agree with the statement by Stewart (1999): “Reviewers' primary role in this community is the improvement of the papers submitted to the journal, whether those papers are accepted for publication or not” (p. 2). Therefore, the reviewing activity provides a chance of experiencing intellectual challenge in a situation without self-interest. In this context, I also find it very insightful to compare my own assessment with that of other reviewers (not so much in terms of the ultimate

recommendation they make to the editor but in terms of their perspective on the paper). After receiving the complete set of reviews for a paper from the editor, I always have a detailed look at the other reviews and compare them with my own. I consider this as a fairly unique learning experience.

On an overall basis, I consider the publishing process with its key element, the double-blind peer review, as a highly effective institution. The process is, of course, fallible, but I do not see any serious alternative way of selecting those papers that should be published in the leading journals of our field. Having made a large part of my professional experience in a different academic system, I was impressed by the professionalism, the competence, and the fairness that characterize review processes. Occasional frustrations that every author has to experience in this context should not lead us to question the system as a whole.

However, for this system to work properly, a few requirements have to be met. One of the most important requirements, in my opinion, is that the editor of a journal plays an active and, if necessary, strong role in the review process. Editors should not be mostly passive observers of the “struggle” between authors and reviewers, waiting for the moment to make the thumbs-up/thumbs-down decision like a Roman emperor.

As almost every author has experienced, different reviewers' suggestions on the same article can pretty much contradict each other. In this situation, it is very helpful when editors give a strong sense of direction and provide useful feedback. In my opinion, it is the editor's task to provide guidance for the review process by, to some extent, consolidating different reviewers' statements and by identifying those reviewer criticisms that should be considered as most relevant. Bringing in an additional reviewer in case of massive contradictions between reviewers is an option that may help but, I believe, should be used cautiously.

As a reviewer and as an author, I have always admired the role played by some editors in the review process.

Their way of closely working through the reviews and providing guidance for authors certainly contributes a lot to the quality of the review process. It also provided interesting feedback to the reviewers.

Editors should also strive for early decisions. It should be clear for almost every manuscript after two rounds of reviewers' comments whether the article will be published. Review processes, which take four or more rounds, with the review still being classified as risky by the editor, typically point to an editor's unwillingness to make decisions. Making decisions, of course, always involves the risk of making wrong decisions. People who cannot live with the dilemma of having to make decisions should not become editors, however brilliant they may be academically.

I think that the editor should also play a strong role in monitoring reviewer behavior. As most authors will agree, it is frustrating to have a reviewer raise a fundamental concern with the article at a later stage in the review process. It is true, of course, that sometimes fundamental flaws become visible only after articles have been revised. Another possible explanation is, however, that reviewers sometimes do not read an article very carefully in the first round and only devote a lot of time and energy to those articles that have passed the first hurdle. Whenever an editor observes such type of behavior, he or she should step in.

Another joint challenge for editors and reviewers is to ensure that different criteria in judging manuscript quality are adequately weighted. I think that the ultimate decision of publishing an article or not should essentially depend on the total significance of the article rather than its technical soundness. We see too many articles in our discipline that provide highly sophisticated and elegant mathematical analyses of issues that are so highly specialized that it really becomes difficult to find a significant set of people (in academia or in business practice) for which the study could be relevant. The quality of the review processes critically depends on the recognition that it is sometimes necessary to sacrifice (at least to some extent) methodological rigor for the sake of relevance. In simple terms, I am suggesting that an article with a strong conceptual contribution merits more methodological tolerance on the side of the reviewers and the editor than an article with only a minor conceptual contribution.

I believe that some editors and journals have done a better job in weighting relevance and rigor in the selection of articles to be published and thereby had a positive impact on the visibility of the journal.

Another issue that, in my opinion, represents a challenge for review processes in our discipline is the distinction between recency and relevance. Indeed, some researchers in our field seem to confound recency with relevance. I have read reviewer questions such as "Why don't you use the theory XYZ, which is used more often in contemporary marketing research than your theoretical

foundation?" or "The literature you draw upon is rather old on average. Aren't there more modern papers to draw upon?" I think that the quality of our review processes depends on editors' and reviewers' recognition that we are in the knowledge creation business, not in a fashion business.

One of the things I would like to see more frequently in the leading journals in our discipline are articles authored by academics outside the United States. I am not suggesting that journals should apply different standards to these submissions. That would be a fatal mistake. What I am asking for is that these submissions should receive fair treatment in the review process. Let me be more specific on this point: as a reviewer, you will most likely find out when you review an article that was authored by an academic working outside the United States whose mother tongue is not English. Even if the article is written in very good English, you will infer it from the subtleties. The inference is that articles that come from outside the United States are somehow not as high in quality. What I am suggesting is that this often incorrect inference should not have any consequence on the manuscript's assessment by the reviewers. In other words, judgments should be made based on the article, not on the nationalities of authors.

This issue is, of course, very difficult to seize. However, I am aware of many German colleagues who view leading U.S.-based marketing journals as somehow predisposed against manuscripts from outside the United States. Some of them base this judgment on their own personal experiences in review processes, regardless of whether their conclusion is justified or not.

What is required from reviewers when looking at articles coming from outside the United States is also some tolerance with respect to language and writing style. Writing an article in a foreign language is a difficult undertaking, and if an article meets a journal's criteria for publication with respect to content and methodological issues, authors should not be overly discouraged on formal and language style issues.

On the basis of my own experience as an author, I have to say that I have not experienced a negative bias against articles from outside the United States, with maybe one or two exceptions. There is one reviewer reaction, however, that I will always remember: in Germany, we use a different-size paper than in the United States. On one of my first submissions to a U.S.-based journal, I submitted a paper that was on the standard paper size I use every day. I received a somewhat aggressive reaction ("Why do you use this strange paper format?") from one of the reviewers. He or she even speculated that I was trying to overcome space limitations through using a slightly bigger paper format. It was interesting for me to see how a seemingly minor issue was seen as a major ethical infraction. As a reaction, I looked for a store in my home town that sells paper in U.S. format. The price was incredibly high since demand for

paper conforming to U.S. standards is probably close to zero in Germany (we are talking about a monopolist in a niche market here). Since then, I have always sent my papers to U.S.-based journals on U.S. paper format, and I consider the fortune I have spent on paper a good investment in my academic career. But, as I said, this was an exception.

REFERENCES

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