

What is Society Publishing For?

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Before I turn to the substantive issue I would like to treat in this column, a word of thanks to Jen'nan Read for her hard work in making this special issue a reality. Most of the articles in this issue were first presented at a conference she organized that received generous support from the Albert and Elaine Borchard Foundation and the Center for the Study of Democracy at UC-Irvine. All of us as sociologists of religion should be grateful for the willingness of organizations such as these to fund our work, and we ought to follow Jen'nan's lead in seeking out these uncommon sources of funding. Thanks also to Kristine Ajrouch for reviewing the issue and writing a commentary on its contents.

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Last December, I attended an executive seminar on "Society Publishing: Envisioning Futures, Evolving Strategies," hosted by Blackwell Publishing at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. The daylong seminar covered a variety of interesting topics, such as: "institutional repositories" as alternatives to scholarly journals, the implications of usage-based versus subscription pricing for libraries, and the ever-provocative issue of impact factors. Sitting in this seminar for an entire day raised a more general question, what is society publishing for? Why does the Association for the Sociology of Religion (ASR) as a professional society sponsor a journal?

Margaret Branschofsky, a librarian at Tufts University who spoke at the seminar, suggested four functions of society publishing: registration, archive, dissemination, and validation. *Registration* is essentially publicity for things happening in the field. Book reviews are a good example of this. Given limited advertising budgets for scholarly books, the publication of a book review in a scholarly journal often serves as the major notice to the field as a whole that a book exists. This is especially true for scholars outside the book's immediate area of concern and others beyond the author's circle of family and friends.

Journals also serve as an *archive*, a public form of a scholarly society's institutional memory. To wit: *Sociology of Religion* is committed to publishing the two keynote lectures from the ASR's annual meeting: the Presidential Address and the Paul Hanly Furfey Lecture. The journal also used to have a right of first review for the ASR's Robert J. McNamara Student Paper Award winner, though

the council voted recently to rescind that requirement—a decision I hope is reconsidered in the future precisely because of this archival function of the journal. Finally, the journal occasionally publishes special issues based on papers presented at the annual meeting. The first issue to appear under my editorship (v.68/n.1) combined all of these elements: Jay Demerath's Presidential Address, Dipankar Gupta's Furfey Lecture, Nanali Cao's McNamara Award-winning paper, and three other papers from the 2005 annual meeting.

Although it seems obvious that journals are a vehicle for *dissemination* of ideas in a field of study, the rise of the World Wide Web drastically changes the landscape for distribution. Scholars no longer need printed journals to make their work available to a wide audience. Sociologists of religion can and do post their work on their own home pages, on web-based working paper series, and in on-line repositories like the Hartford Institute for Religion Research's website (<http://hirr.hartsem.edu/>). Moreover, although we should be cognizant of the "digital divide" both within countries and between them, posting work on the web is in many ways a cheaper and more democratic means of dissemination. Individuals who cannot afford subscriptions or do not have access to institutional subscriptions can often still access material that is posted on free websites.

The final function of society publishing—*validation*—is probably the one that first comes to mind for many people. Thus, an immediate response to the question of what society publishing is for would be, "Duh! Society publishing provides a vehicle for people to get jobs, tenure, promotion, and raises." Publishing an article in a professional journal serves to give one's work a sort of "quality stamp" or "seal of approval" that can be leveraged for material gain. *Peer review* is key to this validating function, and it is a major point of distinction from other means of dissemination like posting work on various websites, or even publishing work in non-peer reviewed outlets like edited books. Seen in this light, the World Wide Web's democratic character is both a strength and a weakness when it comes to disseminating scholarship.

Society publishing is not meant to be a democracy, but (ideally) a meritocracy. Consider this journal's mission statement: "*Sociology of Religion: A Quarterly Review*, the official journal of the Association for the Sociology of Religion, is published quarterly for the purpose of advancing scholarship in the sociological study of religion. The journal seeks to publish original (not previously published) work of exceptional quality and interest without regard to substantive focus, theoretical orientation, or methodological approach." So, while the journal is in fact a forum for registration of work in the field, a public archive for the ASR, and a vehicle for dissemination of ideas, I also know that, at the end of the day, its most important function is that it validates the work and the authors that it publishes. While I do not want to overstate the importance of *Sociology of Religion* in the field, I do constantly have in mind that publishing (or not publishing) a particular manuscript that is submitted could have an effect on the direction of scholarship or an individual's livelihood. Which is to say that I take

the manuscript review process very seriously and seek to make it as efficient and fair as possible.

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Given the importance of peer review to the legitimacy of the journal and its legitimating function, and in the interest of full disclosure to members of our professional society and others, I would like to offer my reflections on how I handle the process at *Sociology of Religion*. I was especially motivated to take up this issue recently by an email message I received expressing concern about the editorial practices of the journal. I would like to take this opportunity to respond to this concern by detailing the journal's editorial process.

The peer review process is essential to *Sociology of Religion*, but it is not perfect. I will certainly make both "Type I" and "Type II" errors along the way: incorrectly rejecting papers that should be accepted and incorrectly accepting papers that should be rejected. Although I aspire run the journal without making any errors, I know that they cannot be avoided entirely. So, my goal is to minimize errors. I do so in a number of ways. I attempt to choose reviewers who have no known bias against a particular author or approach to scholarship (though many of these biases are impossible for me to know). Rather than choosing reviewers who reflect my own biases, as my critic charged, I actually try to find reviewers who differ in theoretical and/or methodological approach from one another. Ideally, each manuscript will be read by three or four reviewers and myself, though often I will render a decision based on just two reviews if the work is highly specialized or I have extraordinary confidence in the reviewers. Furthermore, as often as possible, at least one of the reviewers of each manuscript is a member of our editorial board—a collection of individuals that represents much of the diversity of our field and whose opinions I value very highly in judging manuscripts.

In addition to their qualitative comments on the manuscripts they read, all reviewers are asked to give an overall recommendation using the following categories: (1) accept as is, (2) accept contingent, (3) encourage a revision, (4) permit a revision, and (5) reject outright.¹ Most often, the reviewers' overall recommendations on a manuscript are the same or are within one category of each other (e.g., some will say "encourage revision" and some will say "permit revision"). Although I read each manuscript myself in the process of rendering an editorial decision, if there is a consensus among the reviewers, I take that very seriously. I am not inclined to reject manuscripts that have significant support from peer reviewers, or accept manuscripts that do not. My main bias, therefore, is toward the opinions of the peer reviewers—a bias I think is wholly appropriate for *Sociology of Religion*.

¹My advice to reviewers as well as the specific review forms we use are available on the journal's website (<http://www.sorjournal.org/review/review.htm>).

This is not to say that my own scholarly judgment has no role in the process. I take a more active role at three points in particular. First, when I “deflect” articles prior to their receiving a peer review. Although this requires much more effort on my part, I do this to protect the journal’s most valuable resource: its peer reviewers. The reality is that finding qualified reviewers who are willing to review for the journal and are able to complete their reviews in a timely fashion is one of the most difficult things I have to do as editor. I frankly do not want to waste the time and energy of these reviewers on manuscripts that I can tell from my initial reading do not meet the minimum standards of the journal (e.g., because the theoretical contribution is weak, the data/methods are problematic, the substance is not a good fit, the argument is unclear). I usually include with my deflection letter detailed comments on the paper, which most authors who have communicated with me have appreciated. In one case, after some correspondence with an author whose paper I deflected, I decided to go ahead and allow a peer review. Now that author is working on a second revision and the paper may eventually be published.

A second point at which I must play a bigger role in the decision-making process is when the peer reviews are at variance with one another and I have the difficult task of adjudicating between them. As I indicated, this is not common, but it does happen. This necessarily involves rejecting a paper that at least one reviewer liked or accepting a paper that at least one reviewer disliked. In making these difficult decisions, I know I run the risk of alienating both authors and reviewers. But I also know that this is an important part of the job of editor. It is why we have editors to make these judgment calls (I agree with Reviewer A more than Reviewer B) and not simply data processors to average the reviews ($1 \text{ accept} + 1 \text{ reject} = \text{R\&R}$).

A third, and also very difficult, time when I have to take a more active role is when I am rendering a decision on a revised manuscript that is not progressing quickly toward publication. My general rule is to make an up or down decision on a manuscript after the first revision. I do this because I think that with each revision submitted, an author feels that s/he is closer to a guarantee of eventual publication. I know from personal experience that it is very hard to receive a rejection letter after a second or third revision. This is not to say that I have never allowed second R&Rs, but I do try to commit to either a conditional acceptance or outright rejection after the first revision whenever possible.

At each of these points in the process when I am more actively involved, I do not claim to make judgments from some Archimedean standpoint of objectivity. I remember very well a quote from Leszek Kolakowski I first heard in my undergraduate social theory class: “In all the universe man cannot find a well so deep that, leaning over it, he does not discover at the bottom his own face.” So, no doubt some of my preferences will creep into the journal, since editors are people, too. Those who are troubled by this can rest assured that these preferences are not permanent. I think Rhys Williams had it exactly right when he told me

reassuringly, “That is why editors rotate.” The next editor will likely take the journal in a different direction. I am not Nancy Nason-Clark, and she was not Joe Tamney, and so on.

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Society publishing has many functions. The four I discuss here—registration, archive, dissemination, and validation—have one thing in common: they all provide a service to members of professional associations and to broader scholarly communities. In the end, *Sociology of Religion* exists to serve ASR members in particular and sociologists more generally. If you have concerns about the service we are providing, please contact us (sored@wfu.edu) or our sponsoring society (<http://www.sociologyofreligion.com>).