

THE VALUE OF SPECIALIST ACADEMIC JOURNALS AND THEIR ADAPTION INTO A CHANGED ENVIRONMENT

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This short paper is presented by the retiring editors of the *Australasian Journal of Regional Studies* (AJRS).

Its objective is to recognise the continued importance of such specialist, academic publications but, at the same time, to identify a number of existential threats to their ongoing viability. Based on the authors' experience, the paper suggests some realignment and strategies seen as essential if such journals are to remain important and relevant in a demonstrably different environment.

Without such actions, however, the current alarming loss of a number of such journals will almost certainly continue. For any journal, once publication ceases, the chances of any resurrection seem remote.

Academic or 'scholarly' journals form an integral part of the research and higher education environment. They, together with their parent associations, colleges, conferences and other forms of conclave, form a well-recognised mechanism for the transfer of reliable, contemporary knowledge across groups with common interests and beyond.

Though formal and informal communication has occurred across such individuals and groups for some hundreds of years, it was the establishment of new premier journals through the 19th century (such as the *New England Journal of Medicine* [1812], *The Lancet* [1823], *Nature*, [1869] and *Science* [1880]) that set the generic, 'journal and article' style, standards, and typical protocols for such publications as they continue through to contemporary times.

The number and level of specialisation of journals increased rapidly throughout the 20th century with ‘flagship’ journals emerging through that period (e.g. the *Harvard Business Review* in 1922 and *Cell* in 1974) across western countries. In part, this reflected the exponential growth in education and the scale and sophistication of research through that period. Central to the role and identity of the leading journals is their validation of new knowledge in their designated (inter)disciplinary field. Through the concept of blind peer review, supported by a moderating editorship. The test for publication in the leading journals, in theory at least, is that the authors are adding new knowledge to the field, and that their knowledge claims have been verified by others in the field who, without knowledge of the author’s identity, can scrutinise the new knowledge claims, the methodology through which they have been generated, the evidence derived from the methodology, and the demonstration of relevance to the field.

However, there are, of course, a range of journal types, ranging from scholarly pursuits through to professional, industry and trade publications and to simple, popular journals addressing matters of common interest to a particular section of the community (Rauch, 2021). While there will often be some overlap between many of these, it is always important for any reader to understand the objectives, role and readership of each source, article and publication relied upon and, particularly, to differentiate between those which present evidence based and analytical pieces from those that are simply providing current news or opinion (Rauch, 2021).

In that, there are a number of characteristics that differentiate academic journals. These might include a stated focus on a specific area of research (primary and/or applied), sometimes with a concentration on a particular geographic location or research sub-set. Typically too, academic journals, while enjoying editorial independence, will be supported by an institution or group of some standing and recognition. In most cases, an editorial and management board will set academic and literary parameters, including the identification of general topics of interest and a prescribed length, style and layout for papers submitted. Each will have established, normally independent, review processes and, for papers submitted, will require proven analysis and referencing to support investigations and conclusions. Many journals have an allocated and widely recognised, comparative ranking, normally based on the quality, profile/importance and impact of

that journal over time. Advertising of any sort or general opinion pieces, even by the parent organisation, are not normally allowed.

Authors will typically be seen as experienced in that particular field, though, in many journals, contributions by more junior co-authors are encouraged. Such contributions are often under some guidance or leadership of a more senior author. A PhD or Masters candidate and their supervisor(s) may represent an example of such an arrangement. Over time, too, that practice can provide an important mechanism for widening and increasing the academic cohort involved in the area.

Depending on the level of specialization, the circulation of any particular journal may be quite limited. A small readership may well affect the financial viability of the publication; however, it should not, of itself, be the sole measure of the value of a journal to that academic group and, through them, out to wider research and the general community. There is a range of much more telling impact criteria than direct readership alone (Hoffman, 2021).

Differentiation is often made between tertiary level teaching and research activities and between theoretical and practical/applied studies. However, in the contemporary environment, they are all (hopefully integrated) subsets of teaching and with all parts seen as essential to the development and transference of knowledge. It is important to consider an academic journal in that wider context which, again, implies the need for relevance beyond a small and somewhat esoteric group.

For those directly involved in a particular academic stream, 'their' journal represents a fundamental communication mechanism and pipeline for the safe transference of new knowledge. Wider than that and over time, involvement with the journal reinforces trust and interpersonal relationships among, often geographically scattered, group members and networks.

Such journals can also play a significant and ongoing role in the evolution of universities themselves as they fuse theoretical knowledge into a more applied, integrated practical, problem-solving role (Crow & Dabars 2015). Membership will often be attracted from a 'broad-church', that is a range of disciplines that are not normally nor formally grouped together. There are a very large number of such collectives, often with quite diverse academic pursuits, drawn together by both individual interests and by the interaction of disciplines needed to address complex problems.

‘Regional Studies’ represents one such example where a range of economic and physical sciences, together with political studies, demography and a range of others must be taken into account to provide holistic, timely and practical solutions to multi-faceted issues. That multi-disciplinary body of contemporary knowledge helps defend against the rapidly growing backdrop of unsubstantiated opinions and populist views widely promulgated in social media and elsewhere but without structured, critical analysis, context, peer review and/or exposure through application or case study examination (Raunch, 2021).

One general, but largely unfounded, criticism of journals here relates to the potential to diminish the value of intellectual property and make published material more vulnerable to plagiarism or theft. While that may be an occasional issue in commercialisation of research, any threat here can be easily overrated as many researchers would attest from their past experience in relation to what needs to be rounded-out. There are many occasions where the strictures applied by legal agreements are important – long term, high cost research in medical and biotechnical research provide obvious examples. However, in reality, the commercial value of final outcomes presented in journal articles is quite limited without the detailed research data that stands behind them. These details are not normally presented in the journal article. Supporting that, the above mentioned standards and protocols of any such journals and their enforcement should also encourage a respectful and relatively safe environment to create and add to the body of contemporary knowledge.

Their role in legitimating new knowledge, and the prestige that can accompany this outcome, has contributed to the almost exponential increase in the number of journals, and especially as online publishing has greatly lessened the cost of maintaining a journal, and of managing its processes. However, this proliferation has led to a thinning out of the supply of manuscripts with genuine claims to new knowledge, meaning that the viability of some journals, including some with may become questioned quite suddenly.

It is partly in response to the proliferation of academic journals that a number of ranking systems and criteria have emerged, encouraging comparison across journals and disciplines. On the face of it at least, these should work to improve the quality of journals overall by setting competitive benchmarks relating to the ‘track record’, reputation and measured impact of each. They also encourage the competitive nature and

quest for recognition and prestige sought both by individual researchers and their institutions.

The criteria for such ratings and their application to particular journals and situations will always be a matter of healthy debate. On the one hand, is an (understandable) conservatism in protecting standards, traditions and the existing, accepted knowledge base. On the other is the need to remain open-minded to change, adaptation and innovation. Clearly, each case/journal has its own general philosophy but it is the overall responsibility of all to strive for that reasonable balance and to recognise that either a too conservative or a too lateral approach can do long-term damage reputational damage.

There are criticisms, often from those involved with lower-circulation journals, that these rating systems generally favour the larger, more established publications. While there are no doubt instances where such bias exists, care needs to be taken not to use such observations as a singular excuse for poor ratings or low impact. Concentrating on continuous quality improvement and an appropriate realignment of a low performing journal is probably a more productive strategy than simply 'blaming the system'.

As with practically all academic activities and publications, the nature of those journals has rapidly changed, with such changes continuing and compounding. This brings into question whether the current process of how academic journals are prepared, developed and distributed, remains right for the time and whether such approaches will prove sustainable into the future. In this, there is a range of emerging threats to the very viability of many of those journals across Australia and across a number of Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries.

At the same time, the new environment and technologies offer opportunities to not only defend existing journal arrangements but, in fact, to enhance those publications' relevance and their ability to disseminate knowledge.

Harvey (2022) notes that there is a widely held presumption that the evolution of research, the greater demands for speed of distribution of new knowledge and the ubiquitous presence and role of the internet are all conspiring to see the end of such journals in their current format. He recognises however that the implications, both positive and negative, are much wider than the simple change in physical form.

For example, it is increasingly obvious that the ‘bottlenecks’ and ponderous processes of many current journals result in too few issues and a limited number of articles published each year. Given the rapid increase in the scale and diversity of research activity, this creates unacceptably slow editorial processing. To maintain their position and contemporary relevance, journals must significantly change those processes— perhaps involving continuous publication rather than the long-standing, formal ‘Volume and Issue Number’ identifications still in wide use. In any case and more generally, a strict adherence to models that may have worked in the past may indeed represent a quite dangerous strategy for the future. Some journals already post online articles which they have accepted for subsequent inclusion in their more formally structured issues.

A less predictable global environment seems to have had an adverse effect on more specialist academic pursuits and associated journals. Research conferences and similar activities have represented a key focus for academic interactions and the subsequent creation of journal papers. However, the COVID pandemic through 2020-22 has severely limited all of that and, in many cases, has drastically reduced the subsequent flow of papers being presented for publication. It remains to be seen if the nature and relevance of many such conferences and the production of papers will fully recover into the future.

The profile and reputation of major, international journals fairly well guarantee their survival and growth. However, in more specialist, smaller scale endeavours, there are other additional and more immediate threats. Firstly, COVID has greatly reduced the income available to universities generally. To compensate, academic workloads have generally increased, often leaving less time or recognition in workloads of academics to support activities (such as those related to the preparation of papers or administrative and other support for journals) that do not drive immediate financial returns. Practically all support for academic journals relies heavily on volunteer participation and staff involvement now competes with those increasing workloads and very specific performance measures applied to staff members.

Also Important, and arguably more insidious, has been the immediate availability of huge volumes of ‘unreliable’ information from other sources, particularly from the internet and social media. These act to effectively ‘crowd out’ much of the rational and evidence-based knowledge presented in quality journals (Rauch, 2021).

Faced with those multiple threats, the future of many such publications is not guaranteed and, as noted above, there are worrying signs that the number of academic journals, particularly in more specialist areas, are reducing.

As regards publishing benchmarks, there is understandably academic emphasis placed on acceptance by highly rated and, typically, international journals. Those criteria often work against smaller, diverse academic groupings which rarely have the depth or momentum to secure high journal ratings and where the research involved can be esoteric to specific geographic regions with limited international interest. For all of that, individual papers, even on very fine grained analysis, may be of major significance not just for academics but, more widely across the stakeholder group.

With all of that in mind and looking to the future, we would put forward the following observations and suggestions to provide such journals with the best opportunity for sustainability and increasing impact looking forward. These suggestions particularly apply to our own journal, the Australasian Journal of Regional Studies but, we believe, may have resonance across many comparable publications.

Academic Rigor and Standards of the Journal

In attempting to make such journals sustainable into the future, there is a temptation to change the focus towards a wider audience and, perhaps, towards a more hybrid publication incorporating components of an academic journal, an industry magazine and/or an opinion piece advocating overall positions. In some cases that may, in the opinion of the parent organisation and its membership, become necessary. This however represents a fundamental change that should never be taken lightly. All should be aware that, if affected, such a transition will almost certainly be irreversible.

The strength of most of these journals lies in their identified rigor in analytical research, structure, independence, accuracy and their academic review processes. Even though the format may change and the topics addressed evolve over time, that academic approach should never be compromised. Any move to make a journal more generalist in nature also runs the real risk of having an opposite, negative effect on ranking (see below).

For some associations, this issue of balance can be addressed by also publishing some form of a regular, internet-based newsletter or similar (probably widely circulated and spaced between journal issues). This can canvas emerging issues, provide details of upcoming events and links with associated organisations and, where appropriate, to 'lead into' the formal journal. Such a second publication can act to 'protect' the key purpose and integrity of the journal but, like practically all things here, will rely on the direct support of members to be sustained over time. ANZRS AI itself has had such a newsletter, Sustaining Regions.

Status and Rankings

There are challenges in aligning specialist journals with current academic ranking schemes. Whether there is real equity for smaller journals under present arrangements is, however, almost irrelevant, particularly in the short term.

Securing a higher ranking is critical to attract high quality contributions and to overall impact, profile and reputation. The parent organisation needs to have an ongoing, structured project to ensure that it not only protects the current ranking but, over time, improves that standing and its recognition across all platforms.

Meaningful applied research also raises profile and can often be best effected through partnerships with industry and government agencies. That involves real outreach in problem solving, and, while not compromising quality, being willing to listen truly to issues and priorities of those partners and, particularly, to act in timely and practical ways.

Widening Exposure and Generosity in Circulation

Ready access to a journal with cutting edge articles represents a fundamental value proposition/offer to members for which subscriptions, in cash and in kind, can be sought. Typically host organisations are 'not for profit' and will have quite limited funds. Subscriptions represent important sources of income and, even though internet based publications reduce physical costs, the subscriptions are vital to cover other production costs and for the journal to remain financially viable.

The second, equally important consideration here, however, is the need to disseminate that knowledge to a wide audience of relevant academics, industry organisations, libraries, government at various levels and other policy and decision makers. A balance must be struck here where subscriptions continue to have financial value to direct supporters but, at the same time, the journal/organisation needs to give a wider audience access to the published research. Into the future, this balance may be able to be established by identifying (by name and position) a significant number of opinion and policy leaders in that area and a free subscription offered to them. These subscriptions would need to be closely managed and reviewed annually. They would typically be to relevant politicians, senior departmental officials, officeholders of industry and professional groups and the like.

Listing on appropriate search engines would also be important to secure appropriate width and depth of coverage.

Evolving Processes and Partnering with Technology

The wish, particularly by long-standing journals, to maintain a physical publication is understandable but for most may well become problematic. Moving to an online platform should improve cycle times, volume and accessibility. Production costs should also be reduced through internet based publication. It would appear that most journals have now moved to such formats.

It is essential that such changes in format be accompanied by new, stream-lined processes and procedures which protect quality but accommodate larger volumes of submissions, quicker turnarounds and, in most cases the greater, much more frequent involvement of the editorial board or its subcommittees.

The overall strategy for journal sustainability, therefore, needs to be much wider than simply 'posting online' and runs a review and repositioning of the whole of the operation. Links with the previous hard copy editions can be enhanced by continuing, online, with formats of title pages, indexing, layouts fonts etc. For cohesion and identity, online editions should continue with the same front and rear page, indexing and format as the earlier printed issues.

A common complaint from would-be authors is the protracted turn-around time for review taken by Editorial Boards. There may be sound reasons for delays in final approvals and for amendments to be effected. The best submissions will typically be attracted to journals that enjoy a higher ranking and are most aligned with the subject material of the paper.

As the competition to attract quality papers increases a third criterion emerges. That relates to the ease of dealings with that journal. Relevant here is the need for simple, streamlined processes, clear expectations and timely and supportive feedback that produce the production of the best quality papers relevant to the readership.

Those objectives are unlikely to be met by the somewhat aloof and doctrinaire attitude exhibited by a number of journals in the past, particularly in the current, highly competitive environment.

Thinking Like the Readership and Authors – Existing and New

An ongoing challenge for any editorial board is to ensure that each edition remains true to the objectives of the organisation and is current to the interests of and issues for its membership, now and into the foreseeable future. An effective editorial board needs to be aware of both of the ‘mainstream’ interests of the readership while also observing significant issues that are emerging from within the disciplines represented.

Each edition and each paper needs to be assessed against those benchmarks, including the acceptance of any themed or ‘conference’ edition.

In the case of geographically specialised journals, any international submission needs to be assessed for possible inclusion on the basis of its alignment with the primary readership – either by case study and/or comparison. Care must be taken to ensure that case study paper submissions adequately describe the context, geographic and other particular characteristics, and generalise outcomes sufficiently to make them of interest and perhaps for application to those in other locations.

Depending on the circumstances, theming of particular editions may well be justified as can a ‘conference edition’ where

appropriate. It needs to be noted, however, that such inclusion may slow the normal flow of papers through the system. Further, there are obviously key differences between conference and journal papers which may be quite difficult and time consuming to transpose. Rather than a nominated, conference edition, it may be more effective to feed them out over several editions, though still recognising any link to the preceding conference.

A Task for All

Perhaps of all the recommendations here this is the most important and fundamental to the sustainability of such an enterprise going forward into the changed environment into the future.

In most academic and similar groups, tasks such as those relating to their journal/other publication have traditionally been allocated to an editorial board (effectively, a subcommittee). While decision-making may well need to be concentrated, the multitude of tasks involved, while also maintaining quality and meeting all deadlines, is now often beyond the capacity of a small committee. What is now required is a true commitment by the tranche of the senior members of the supporting organisation, whether formal office bearers or not, to undertake key and continuous supporting roles.

Among other things, tasks here might include:

- input into the strategic direction of the journal and alerting the editors to emerging issues and opportunities;
- acting as a general advocate for the journal across wide academic, government and industry links;
- taking the role of author/lead author of submissions to the journal, including support for/guidance of (as discussed above) more junior academics and industry partners. (A real commitment and loyalty can be exemplified here when members are willing to submit papers to this journal, even though opportunities from higher ranked may have been possible);
- Being willing to act as a reviewer of other submitted papers.

Left to a few, this list of strategies and the actions that follow are daunting, given also the other increasing general work demands referred to earlier in this paper. Nevertheless, a concentrated and co-ordinated effort to evolve many existing journals through these new environments appears essential. There is a sound, and in fact, a vital role for many such specialist journals into the future but that future will not be the same as the past. It is an opportunity as well as a challenge for the members of the parent academic groupings to apply the individual and group effort to benefit from that change.

At this point at least, that decision remains in their hands.

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