A Case for Adopting Appellate Review into AAEA Editorial Policy: Counterpoint

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Huffaker and Mittelhammer (H&M) argue for a formal appeal process for authors submitting manuscripts to an American Agricultural Economics Association (AAEA) publication for the cases where an author feels his/her manuscript was rejected for insufficient grounds. H&M maintain that in these cases, the editor necessarily becomes an advocate for one side in the adversarial process between authors and reviewers. They further contend that power in the final decision point is biased against the author when the editor is persuaded by a reviewer’s negative (but erroneous) assessment. Given this imbalance of power, they conclude that the author is at a competitive disadvantage and should have some recourse to appeal a decision that is based on an incorrect reviewer evaluation, which the editor buys in to.

H&M imply that the current system does not permit an author to question an editorial decision and seek redress. At present, authors who feel their manuscript received an unfair hearing at a journal have two options: asking for a reconsideration of the manuscript’s suitability for publication, and taking the manuscript to another journal. H&M’s suggestion for an appellate review board is a heavy-handed version of the option to request rereview.

By not finding the remedy of requesting the editor to rereview the submission sufficiently acceptable, H&M’s policy recommendation to institute an appellate review board suggests an editor cannot objectively handle an appeal, which questions the integrity of the editor. By not even mentioning the remedy to take a rejected manuscript to another publication outlet, H&M imply this remedy is an inferior option which begs the question, why is making sure a particular submission gets accepted into the specific AAEA publication in question so important?

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An author can protest and request another round of reviews from a new set of referees. In many ways, an appeal is an easy file to manage. The issues of contention have been crystallized, and identifying the appropriate sources for further input (e.g., an associate editor) is easy to define.

H&M contend the need for a consistently applied quality control mechanism in the form of an appellate board. However, at what point does the external check on the editorial review process end? What if the authors find the appellate committee also falls for the same argument the editor subscribed to in issuing a rejection? H&M’s claim that a decision based on an incorrect analysis must be reversed; however, an unjust rejection will still stand.

The heavy-handed appeal process H&M suggest confuses the goal of communicating scholarly activities with making sure an author’s work gets into a particular journal. The quality of the journal can imply a quality imprimatur to the work published in that outlet. Certainly, there are incentives for individuals to engage in publishing activities to the extent that professional interests take a back seat to the self-interest of those involved in the process. However, the AAEA’s publications do not serve to meet the needs of university promotion and tenure committees or the salary administration for its authors. The goal of publishing scholarly research in peer-reviewed outlets is to present to the community of scholars an article that has been independently vetted for quality with a view toward advancing knowledge, and a number of potential outlets exist for an individual’s scholarly endeavors.

Evidence of a Problem?

H&M suggest a problem exists with the current system. We disagree and contend that it is important to identify the extent to which the system is “broke” before proceeding to (in our view) an extreme action of creating an appellate board review. While they claim that a growing number of associations are adopting an appeal mechanism, they provide no direct evidence. How many other journals in the social sciences (and economics, in particular) offer an appellate review procedure outside of the journal’s editorial board? Such evidence may reveal the extent other associations find the need for appellate board review is necessary.

The case of the Journal of Economic Entomology is a very special one that cannot be viewed as a broad case in point. Being rejected from this journal also means one is prohibited from submitting the manuscript to any of the other 10 journal and bulletins published by the Entomological Society of America. Clearly, a rejection decision from the Journal of Economic Entomology comes at a very heavy price. No such restriction exists for economics.

If potentially arbitrary editorial decisions are being handed down regularly, a quality impact should be visited upon the publication. With the editorial process working toward separating the wheat from the chaff, H&M focus their concern on the editor who discards too much wheat. Such flawed editorial decision making will also make errors on the other end as well: that is, publishing too much chaff! The consequence is the production and distribution of a journal whose reputation will suffer. The number of submissions and subscriptions would fall over time if the problem persisted (or, the number of submissions and
subscriptions would not increase as much as it could). Over the past 20 years, we have seen the proliferation of competing publication outlets for refereed research in agricultural and applied economics along with a 25% drop in AAEA membership. During this same period, *The American Journal of Agricultural Economics (AJAE)* submissions have averaged over 300 manuscripts per year with acceptance rates consistently reported between 25 and 30% (see *AJAE*, issue number 5, various years). The quality ranking of the *AJAE* (Barrett, Olia, and Bailey) remains high, suggesting no problem of the magnitude to influence the changing quality of the publication.4

**Questioning the Proposed Appellate Protocol**

If an appellate review protocol were in place, the authors filing an appeal bear the burden of demonstrating the errors in the editor’s rejection. The author has access to the comments prepared by the reviewers for the author’s and the editor’s letter communicating the decision and his/her rationale. But, three important pieces of information are not available to the author, namely (1) the evaluative letter the reviewer addresses to the editor where the reviewer specifically offers his/her recommendation regarding the publishability of the manuscript, (2) the reviewers’ identities and knowledge of their full competence, and (3) the editor’s confidence in the reviewers’ judgment. The appellant must proceed with a case without full information.

H&M state that the appellate process will not intrude upon the editor’s authority. The logic of this statement is not clear. If an article can be published over the objection of the editor and reviewers who found the manuscript unsuitable, then on whose authority is the article being published? The published issue of the journal indicates who serves as the editor of the issue. An article published by the declaration of the external appellate board would be one that the appellate board sanctions as meritorious for publication. Without a published caveat (say, a footnote) indicating the article’s review was taken outside the normal peer review process, the external appellate board is ordering the publication of an article. This sounds like a very heavy step on the editor’s toes.

**Remedies**

We agree with H&M that an editor’s decision should be able to stand the light of day. But the emphasis should be on distinguishing between individuals making poor decisions and the process of making the decisions. A policy should be considered if a persistent flaw in the process exists, not because of an individual’s actual decisions. One of the AAEA’s goals is to guide the production of a high-quality scholarly outlet communicating research in the economics of agriculture and its allied fields. If a process permits an individual to subvert the intent of the organization’s goals without recourse, then the execution of the process is flawed. Identifying and appointing capable editors is the job of the AAEA’s executive body.

H&M suggest that submitting authors are placed in an adversarial relationship with editors. The editor–author relationship is intended to be constructive rather than adversarial even in the case of a rejection. Commentary
from peers is used to come to editorial decisions and this commentary is
provided to the authors with the intent that it may be useful as they continue to
generate in research on this topic. The editors and reviewers apply the accepted
and commonly understood research values of the discipline, which are
historically defined (Barry; Crane; Lacy and Busch). As such, they serve as
stewards of the discipline’s standards and are not imposing personal evaluation
criteria. While this is the ideal, deviations can happen. We submit that the
current remedies available to authors are sufficient to address mistakes. The
quality and reputation of the AAEA’s publications does not stand on the
shoulders of the AAEA as the sponsoring agent, but on the quality of the
scholarly contributions and judgments of the authors, editors, and reviewers
who have served the publications in the past. Identifying the editors and the
decisions they make as a point of controversy misses the magnitude and scope
of effort involved in producing a scholarly journal.

Endnotes
1 Authors who feel their manuscripts were wrongly rejected stand in considerable and very good
company. Gans and Shephard related that Nobel Laureates and other notables are no strangers to
the “unfair” rejection letter of what eventually are recognized as classic contributions to economic
knowledge.
2 It has happened. In fact, more than one American Journal of Agricultural Economics editor can
report that a reevaluation of a rejected manuscript was even prompted by a reviewer who felt a
manuscript was wrongly rejected.
3 Since we are swapping stories, one of the authors had a manuscript submitted to the Journal of
Economic Entomology rejected and he and his coauthors protested the review. The editor entertained
the appeal and decided that the manuscript was not only suitable for publication, but he placed it at
the premier position of that issue as a “Forum Article.” So, the informal process does work, even for
the Journal of Economic Entomology.
4 If the process is, in fact, flawed, then the problem H&M feel exists will have been in place since
the journal’s inception. With some evidence indicating that the quality of the AJAE, for example, is
constant and high over time, the implication of H&M’s discussion is that the journal could be better
than it is. However, this is based on the discovery of a problem that has not been verified.

References
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