

Manuscript queues and editorial organization

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*How did one journal cut manuscript
processing time almost in half? The answer appears
to be increased manpower which permitted
more efficient division of labour*

Delay in manuscript reviewing affects seriously the distribution of rewards in any academic discipline because the scholar's advancement in his field is partly determined by the frequency with which his work gets into print. Articles and letters to the editor often voice complaints about the sluggishness of the process. Thus when an academic journal announces that it has cut the waiting time of its contributors in half, that statement would seem worthy of general notice. Such an achievement has been reported by the *American Journal of Sociology*. From 1970 to 1972, this journal's manuscript processing time rose from thirteen to eighteen and then to twenty-four weeks. During the first three years of the editorial administration ending June 1976, processing time was reduced somewhat below the original level of thirteen weeks. How was this change brought about?

The editorship of the *American Journal of Sociology* changed hands in June 1973, and information on manuscript processing is available for the three years thereafter. Of the 512 papers originally drawn (approximately every third chronologically ordered case), 148 had been returned to their authors as unacceptable immediately after an initial editorial review. Those manuscripts which were still under consideration by the journal could not be included in the sample. Our conclusions, therefore, are based on the record of 364 papers.

Data from the journal's files are supplemented by the direct impressions

Reading time (in days) by year and category of referee

	Before 10/74		10/74-9/75		10/75-6/76	
	mean reading time	readers % (n)	mean reading time	readers % (n)	mean reading time	readers % (n)
consulting editors	32.6	5 (18)	23.8	27 (94)	21.2	27 (49)
editorial board	34.1	13 (50)	26.5	11 (38)	30.2	5 (9)
university-related staff, students	20.2	7 (25)	30.4	6 (19)	30.8	11 (19)
total of special readers ¹	30.1	25 (93)	25.3	44 (151)	24.6	43 (77)
regular readers	26.9	75 (276)	25.8	56 (189)	25.1	57 (103)
TOTALS	27.7	100 (369)	25.5	100 (340)	24.8	100 (180)

1/ Corresponding unweighted means are 29.0, 26.9 and 27.4.

of both authors. One author who served as an associate editor has recorded some of his impressions in a previous article.¹ The other author worked as a member of the staff for several weeks, learning the procedure of manuscript processing as well as observing activities in the office. He also attended meetings of the editorial board. We thus obtained a comprehensive view of how the journal attended to its business.

Was faster manuscript processing at the *American Journal of Sociology* at least partly the result of faster referee reading time? Traditionally, referees have been blamed for delays, and a number of articles support this view.²

The management of the *American Journal of Sociology* was concerned and took some direct steps to deal with the time required by readers. In October 1974 the journal imposed upon each member of its board of consulting editors the obligation to read at least two papers a month and to furnish comments in a dependably punctual way. This demand, which was repeated a year later for the incoming consulting editors (they serve staggered two-year terms) was a sharp break from the earlier reluctance to impose special obligations on those who agreed to serve the journal as special consultants. The table enables us to evaluate the impact of this policy.

From 1968 to 1972, the *American Journal of Sociology*'s referees consistently maintained a reading time of about one month per paper. The next to last row in the table shows that the reading time of regular referees remained at approximately this same level from 1974 to 1976. From June 1973 to October 1974 (the month in which extra duty was first assigned to the board of consulting editors), 26.9 days passed between the assignment of a paper to a regular reader and the receipt of his evaluation. During the periods October 1974 to September 1975 and October 1975 to June 1976, the readers took an average of 25.8 and 25.1 days respectively.

Before the October 1974 change, consulting editors read papers in 32.6 days; in the two periods following this change, the reading time dropped to 23.8 and 21.2 days. Note, however, that under the new (post-October 1974) system the consulting editors are only about two to four days faster than the regular reviewers.

Reading times for the editorial board (Department of Sociology faculty) moved from 34.1 to 26.5 and 30.2 days through the three-year sequence. For University of Chicago-related staff and graduate students the comparable figures were 20.2, 30.4, and 30.8. From these figures it is not possible to identify any group of readers which was consistently faster or slower than others. Thus, when we averaged the reading times of those groups of referees which had a special relationship to the journal and which also had, from the journal's point of view, a special obligation to it, we found nothing extraordinary. There was no tendency for the reading times of regular referees to be significantly slower than those of the more select group.

Through its consulting editor policy, the *American Journal of Sociology* had succeeded only in narrowing the scope of professional participation in the decision-making process. Before October 1974, consulting editors accounted for only 5% of reader assignments; following October 1974, they accounted for 27% of all reader assignments. By contrast, the representation of regular readers dropped from 75% to 56–7%. The editorial process thus came more and more under the control of a relatively small number of scholars, but without increased proficiency. Thus, what was implemented as a measure to reduce manuscript queuing time – under the assumption that narrowing the pool of referees would enable the journal to exercise a higher degree of control over them – had really had nothing to do with the sharp improvement in turnover which the journal has achieved.

This conclusion is consistent with other findings. Observation of the

procedures of the editorial office showed that manuscripts were processed along a three-point queue. These stages included 1/ the amount of time elapsing between the date a manuscript is received from a contributor and the day it is assigned to referees; 2/ clerical preparation of manuscripts, reading time, and transit time; 3/ the interval between the day an evaluation is received from the second referee and the day on which the author is advised of the board's acceptance or rejection of his paper.

In the first two stages, manuscript queuing times were reduced by less than a week during the present editor's tenure; stage 1 dropped on average from 2.2 to 1.8 weeks, and stage 2 from 8.0 to 7.7 weeks. The final stage presents a very different picture. In 1968 the mean time taken for stage 3 was 4.2 weeks, and this had increased to 12.1 weeks by the end of 1972. In the first year under the new editor, stage 3 was cut to 2.4 weeks, and in the next two years the time used in this part of the operation stabilized and levelled off at 2.0 weeks, a figure which is less than half the best time recorded previously.

The speed-up of the manuscript evaluation process at the *American Journal of Sociology* thus had little to do with the reading time of referees or the speed with which papers were assigned to them. The improvement was limited to the way the journal handled papers *after* they were returned by its readers. Was this improvement related to a reduction in workload? The rate of increase in the number of manuscripts received for review began to level off in the fiscal year 1973-4. The 544 papers received during 1972-3 reflected an all-time high; but in 1973-4 the number decreased to 510. While incoming manuscripts surpassed the previous high during the next two years, growth was not as pronounced as in the earlier period. The number of book reviews also increased significantly during the new editorial regime, but the number of articles and notes dropped sharply. Finally, journal pages increased from 1969 to 1973, moving from 1080 to 1601. During the following two years, however, this rate of growth levelled off.

While the workload of the *American Journal of Sociology* is no longer growing as fast as it did during its expansion years (late 1960s and early 1970s) there has been no *reduction* in the amount of work to be done. But there has been a marked increase in the number of man-hours available to handle this workload: 102 paid work hours per week were available in 1975-6 compared to 70 in 1972-3. Unfortunately, we had no means of checking whether the total man-hours devoted to the journal by the editor

and the associate editors was greater after 1973 than before. But there is good reason to assume that it was. Before 1973, the hours put in by faculty members were not subtracted from committee responsibilities; beginning with the term of the present editor, they were.

But even when increased editorial time is taken into account, it is difficult to account for the improvement in the journal's operations on the basis of decreased workload and the availability of personnel. Between 1972 and 1975-6, manuscripts received per man-hour were reduced by 27%. During this same period, the total manuscript processing time was cut by 52% - a sharper reduction than the lessened per capita workload would lead us to expect. Evidently, then, another factor was involved in the improved editorial efficiency.

The *American Journal of Sociology* has undergone significant structural changes during the past three years. First, the hiring of an assistant managing editor during the tenure of the new editor-in-chief had the effect of refining the journal's division of labour as well as increasing the number of man-hours at its disposal. With the subsequent partitioning of the assistant managing editor's position into one part-time job concentrating on editorial matters and another concentrating on clerical duties, an even more sharply drawn division of labour was achieved.

It is reasonable to assume that with each worker being able now to focus his attention on a small range of activities, a more efficient level of operation may have been reached. However, the particular changes described above could not themselves be responsible for improved manuscript processing time; they were brought about *after* the 1973-4 improvement had been registered. In connection with only one procedure did a change in editorial organization *precede* the reduction in processing time, namely, the communication of decisions on manuscripts to their authors. In the previous administration, the managing editor was responsible for this task as well as a wide variety of other higher priority jobs. In the present administration, the editor himself assumes this responsibility; the managing editor concentrates almost exclusively on the preparation of manuscripts for publication after they have been accepted.

The organizational factor, however, should not be overemphasized. Assuming that, prior to the present administration, the *American Journal of Sociology* did not process manuscripts as fast as it could, that theoretical peak could not have been very high. At this time, growth in workload far

outstripped increases in staffing: the number of manuscripts received between 1969–70 and 1972–3 rose by 51% while man-hours per week increased by only 17%. During the past two years, man-hours available for work grew faster than work itself. In the previous editorial administration only one person was available to handle all the technical editorial task. Reading and correcting galleys, checking page and reproduction proofs, preparing new and refereed typescripts for deliberation, assignment, and disposition, composing letters which detailed the revisions asked for by referees or editorial board, and explaining the board's decision to reject a paper – all these (and other) tasks were performed by one person. Today these same jobs are divided among three – the managing editor, full-time, and her assistant and the editor-in-chief, both part-time. Because it is no longer necessary for any one of these to shift continually among several jobs, all work is now done more efficiently.

It is not possible, then, to attribute improvements in the journal's operation to reorganization alone. Ultimately, it is the augmentation in personnel which allowed the editor to remove the post-evaluation bottleneck. Organizational improvements are possible only when there are resources available to organize. Also, a massive initial investment in time was required in order to plan and bring about structural improvements. Of course, the crucial question was whether the initial increase in processing speed would be sustained when that investment in time was withdrawn (as it has been). The findings confirm that it has. (Despite its efficiency, the present editorial administration is not totally reliable. In the summer of 1976, just beyond the point at which we concluded our observations, the operation of the journal simply broke down. New manuscripts were not sent to reviewers and evaluated papers piled up and waited for disposition. Everything returned to normal, however, when the summer vacation, and the misunderstandings associated with it, came to an end.)

A quantitative increase in manpower thus made possible qualitative changes which have proven to be of significant consequence. If a particular level of personnel – a certain 'critical mass' – is presupposed by a refined and efficient division of labour, then that level, and its associated economy of scale, has been achieved. By contrast, the editorial operations of some journals may be too small to be efficient.

Thus, in contrast with the frequent assumption that improvement in referee behaviour is the best way to bring about a faster review process, the

experience of the *American Journal of Sociology* shows the best potential for speeding up a journal's operations is in reorganization and increased staffing in the journal office itself. To which other hard-pressed editors may well say 'Amen – I knew it.'

1/ Barry Schwartz, 'Manuscript queues and editorial organization,' in *Queuing and Waiting: Studies in the Social Organization of Access and Delay* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), pp. 63–87

2/ Mayer Zald and Eugene Weinstein, 'For sanctions on irresponsible reviewers,'

American Sociologist, November 1968, p. 300; Hyman Rodman, 'The moral responsibility of journal editors,' *American Sociologist*, November 1970, pp. 351–7; Norval Glenn, 'unrewarded labor and the need for speed,' *American Sociologist*, February 1975, p. 54