

# The Profession

## The Ugly Process of Journal Submissions: A Call for Reform

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Virtually everyone in the business of political science has experienced some degree of difficulty in getting their work published. The following story describes a recent rejection of an article of mine by a major journal in the field. The rejection itself is not disturbing, considering the very high percentage of all articles that are rejected on their first submission; I have had articles both accepted and rejected before. However, what is disturbing is the *process* of evaluation to which my article was subjected over the course of a sixteen-month period.

In order to ensure the anonymity of the other parties, I have changed the name of the journal to the non-existent *Political Science Tomorrow*.

### The Story

In late July 1995, I finished a draft of an article on which I had been working for the previous year. The article dealt with various historical and contemporary aspects of Russian politics. Being an adjunct professor at the time, I sought the feedback of two senior colleagues who advised me to submit the article to a well-respected journal, hoping in the best case scenario to receive an acceptance before the end of November, thereby increasing my chances of landing a position during the main academic hiring period from September to March. Accordingly, I submitted the article to *Political Science Tomorrow*, one of the oldest and most prestigious journals in the field. Like most major journals in political science, the editorial guidelines of *PST* stated that all articles were peer-reviewed and that the journal would make a concerted ef-

fort to make an initial response within a three-month period.

More or less right on schedule, I received a letter in early November from the managing editor of *PST*, and two referee's reports. The first report was a flat-out rejection of my article. The entire rejection consisted of a testy ten-word response which included the adjectives "atheoretical," "journalistic," and "trivial." I found it to be offensive, non-professional, and in violation of the basic accepted norms of the peer-review process. If a reviewer is willing to accept a review assignment, and then use this sort of language, that reviewer is required to back it up with a detailed set of justifications which point to direct evidence of the shortcomings in my article. In stark contrast, the second report was a very tough, thorough, detailed, and constructive critique, consisting of five single-spaced pages. The reviewer addressed both general and specific comments, and took me to task on a number of oversights and errors, but the review also highlighted the promising aspects of the analysis. In the end, the reviewer suggested that the piece be revised and resubmitted. In due course, and in keeping with the norms of the peer review process, the letter from the managing editor informed me that *PST* could not yet accept my article for publication, stating, "[h]owever I encourage you to revise and resubmit this article. Given the unusually wide disparity of opinion, we will endeavor to send it to a third referee."

I decided to call the managing editor of *PST* to confirm that I should indeed go ahead with the revisions. In our conversation, I was told to go forward and rewrite the article based on the one peer review,

to whom the piece would again be sent. The managing editor also apologized for the unprofessional response of the other reviewer. I proceeded to revise the article and resubmitted it in late December 1995 after incorporating new data from the Russian Duma elections. In early March 1996, I received a second letter from *PST* accompanied by a much shorter set of comments by the reviewer, who concluded: "[t]his paper is very much improved from the previous draft. The argument is now consistent and clear and the data more up-to-date. A few revisions are still called for, but the paper is publishable and should contribute to a re-examination of Russian democracy." I was pleased. The recommended revisions were relatively minor, dealing with style rather than the substance of the argument. The managing editor's second letter from *PST* restated that the article could not yet be published, "[H]owever we think the piece has promise and strongly encourage you to revise the manuscript along the guidelines of the referee and resubmit it."

Despite the positive review, I thought perhaps there had been an oversight, considering that the report from a third referee had not been enclosed. To clarify the matter, I again called the managing editor who informed me that *PST* would stick to the opinion of the one referee, who, like all of *PST*'s reviewers, was a highly respected expert in the field, and I was urged to submit the revisions as quickly as possible. During our conversation, we also discussed the potential problem of the upcoming Russian presidential elections. I wanted to confirm that I should indeed promptly submit the

article again, even though the election was still three months away. The managing editor asked me to go ahead with the second set of revisions, again based on the suggestions of the one reviewer. We agreed that if necessary, I could update the piece following the June election in Russia.

At this point, I thought that, for all practical purposes, the piece had been accepted. After a year of preliminary work, followed by an eight-month process of revision, my efforts on the article were paying off. Concurrently, my chances for landing a position in the highly competitive job market should now improve somewhat with an article forthcoming in the well-respected journal, *Political Science Tomorrow*. I finished the revisions in short order and put the piece in the mail the next day, assuming that I would have a final confirmation letter from *PST* in the next couple of weeks. The letter had not arrived by mid-April, so I called *PST* and asked what the hold-up was. I was informed that the article had been sent back to the reviewer for one final set of comments. I was somewhat surprised considering the second set of comments essentially called for cosmetic revisions. However, afterwards I realized that like all good journals, *PST's* decision depended on strict adherence to the peer review process.

The much anticipated letter did not arrive from *PST* until early May 1996. Much to my consternation, the third letter informed me that my article was rejected, stating "... the [editorial] staff concluded that your paper's primary focus on Russia's political culture and relatively short and general analysis of its possible policy implications for Russia as an Asian power in the 21st century make this an unsuitable article for *PST*. It was also felt that due to the contemporaneous nature of the final section of your article it would have too short a shelf life for our journal." To put it mildly, I was not pleased. There was no accompanying report by the referee, nor were the results of the referee's final report mentioned in the letter. I responded by sending the managing editor an e-mail message asking to see the final reviewer's report on which I

assumed the rejection had been based. I was informed that, in fact, the final paper had never been sent to the reviewer for a third time, even though previously I had been told that the reviewer was looking at the article following my second set of revisions. The reasons the article had been rejected disturbed me. It is my understanding that journal editors are supposed to read all articles *before* deciding on peer reviewers, or at least after receiving the initial set of reviews and proceeding on to the next stage. If an article is not appropriate for the journal, standard practice dictates that the editor then rejects the article before the process of revision begins, thereby giving the author the opportunity to send it elsewhere. I decided to write a response to the rejection letter and I hoped *PST* would reconsider its decision.

My response consisted of the following points. First, as a result of the reviewer's initial set of detailed comments I had revised the article significantly and removed a great deal of historical material which the reviewer did not believe was relevant to the argument. Thus, I was responding to *PST's* instructions to resubmit the article after I had addressed the reviewer's concerns. I offered to reinstate the original material to further solidify the article from the standpoint of historical detail, thus making it less "general." However, I pointed out that the reviewer might again reject this material as being unnecessary. Second, also in response to the reviewer's first set of comments, I had increased the amount of material on Russia's own Asian cultural strands and Moscow's growing interest in the Asia-Pacific. However, I believed the "staff" at *PST* perhaps had not read the piece closely enough, pointing out that the paper was *not* primarily an attempt to deal with Russia as an Asian power in the 21st Century. Rather, the paper was an attempt to analyze the future trajectory of Russian democracy by including the authoritarian-statist Asian variables of Russia's Eurasian political culture. I offered to change the title, which was possibly misleading to the staff. Third, in regard to the contemporaneous nature of the arti-

cle and the question of shelf life, I pointed out that the article had always dealt with both historical and contemporary issues since its original submission, and I found this criticism to be belated. Furthermore, I reminded the managing editor that we had discussed on the telephone the issue of on-going events in Russia in late March, after I had finished responding to the reviewer's second set comments. I could only presume that the *PST* "staff" believed that my lack of analysis on the upcoming presidential election made the piece too contemporaneous, and the final analysis was somehow incomplete. As a solution, I offered to revise the article again after the Russian presidential election. I finished my letter by stating that, "[C]onsidering the crucial importance of the peer review process in maintaining the credibility of professional writing, I urge you to reconsider your decision."

One week later, I received a letter asking that I submit a post-election revision, the letter included the statement that "[W]e will send it back to the original referee and also send it out to a new referee." Clearly, my letter must have touched a minor cord of conscience at *PST*. However, after being told that the initial reviewer had previously been sent the article, followed by the revelation that he or she had not, I was suspicious of *PST's* plan to now bring on a new referee. At that time, I had been working under *PST's* instructions for nearly a year, addressing the criticism of their chosen reviewer. I suspected that I was being set-up for an assured rejection, but, having invested so much time and effort in *PST*, I felt it was worth one last try, and I hoped the final decision would in-fact hinge on the judgment of both the new and old reviewer, as stated in *PST's* most recent letter.

Regrettably, my doubts were confirmed in late November 1996, sixteen months after the original submission. I received a final rejection from the managing editor and only a single report from a new reviewer, who was highly critical of my analysis. In itself, the criticism by the new reviewer did not surprise me. As often occurs in the review process, the

peer evaluations clashed directly. The new reviewer was harshly critical of my analysis regarding many of the same points that the first reviewer had singled out for praise. Likewise, some material which was not cited, and was deemed as being important to the new reviewer, had in fact appeared in the original version, but I had removed it in order to meet the first reviewer's critique. If I had received both reports at the same time, perhaps I could have synthesized the critiques under the guidance of the editor. If this was not possible, I could have withdrawn the piece and sent the article to a different journal nearly a year earlier. Likewise, *PST* had misled me once again regarding the review process. In my final telephone conversation with the managing editor, I was informed that the paper had not even been sent to the original reviewer, and the new reviewer's word was now final. The managing editor of *PST* offered no apologies, stating that it was the prerogative of the journal's senior editor (a noted expert on American urban politics) to make whatever decision he/she desired regarding my piece on Russian politics.

## Conclusion

Clearly, this is a case of a review process gone awry. However, from anecdotal sampling of colleagues over the past five years, it is also clear to me that experiencing poor editorial professionalism is not uncommon. Undoubtedly, the review process sometimes works correctly. As mentioned above, I have had other articles both accepted and rejected, and I have not felt inspired to write to *PS*. In keeping with normal practice, the rejections of my previous articles were made either by editors on an initial screening, or on the basis of reviewers' reports, and all of my articles which have been accepted required some degree of revision as suggested by the reviewers. I will acknowledge that it is even the standard practice of some journals to reject articles after re-

ceiving initially positive reviews (Lewis-Beck and Levy, 1993). However, in this case, the managing editor of *PST* systematically distorted the journal's own stated review process, and was culpable of falsehood in both verbal and in written correspondence. In good faith I went through the process as *PST* defined it, and then, in the end, my article was rejected when the journal decided to alter the rules by which I was being evaluated, skipping from one peer reviewer to the next. Perhaps the "staff" at *PST* does not realize that the final decision cost me a great deal in terms of both time and effort. Decisions on publications can determine whether someone gets hired, makes tenure, is promoted, or is fired. I am not trying to reinvent the wheel of publication here; rather, I would like to remind both journal editors and the reviewers of articles that their decisions are not without human costs, and they have a serious responsibility to uphold professional standards. In a perfect world, the existing rules would probably suffice. Editorial guidelines would be clearly stated and adhered to. Ideally, editors would screen articles, assign appropriate reviewers, and have an initial response to authors within a three month period. This ideal world would be inhabited by reviewers who responded in timely fashion, and who's recommendations would actually form the basis for decisions of publication. However, for the most part, this ideal world does not exist. Therefore, when the rules of the game are violated by the rule makers, it leaves authors with little choice but to attempt to alter the status quo.

Higher education is changing. Years of budget cuts, privatization of services, a large upswing in the percentage of non-tenure track jobs, the increasing number of attacks on the tenure system—all signal that political scientists are being driven further into the economic mainstream and that we are expected to behave in terms of market competition. In terms of employment, it is a buyer's market. Today, it is not uncommon

for job searches to elicit 200–300 applications, and the numbers seem to grow each year. The old adage "publish or perish" used to apply only to professors at major research institutions. Today, a minimal publication record is usually required before a junior scholar is even granted a job interview. This even holds true at many small teaching-oriented colleges. In this new reality, it becomes clearer than ever before that one of the few commodities "owned" by political scientists is the intellectual production of their labor: books, monographs, and journal articles.

In conclusion, I would argue that the rules of journal submission be changed to address these new realities. I propose that journals should not have exclusive monopoly rights over articles, and that multiple submissions be allowed. Competition for written work would not make right the fact that *PST* violated professional standards in my case; however, the negative costs would have been ameliorated if the article were now accepted by another journal. In an imperfect world, multiple submissions should be allowed for journal articles in order to give authors a fair chance of having their work accepted within a reasonable time frame. This is a routine practice with academic books, it should be the norm with articles as well.

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## About the Author

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