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ESSAYS

The Manuscript Review Process

The Proper Roles of Authors, Referees, and Editors

ARTHUR G. BEDEIAN
Louisiana State University

Drawing on a 28-item survey, this article reports the editorial experiences of 173 lead authors of articles published in the Academy of Management Journal *and* Academy of Management Review, *over the period 1999 to 2001, to explore some relatively new dynamics that have changed the character of the manuscript review process and given rise to a mounting debate over the proper roles of authors, referees, and editors. Among the survey's more disturbing findings, more than one third of the responding authors reported that recommended revisions in their manuscripts were based on an editor's or referee's personal preferences, and almost 25% indicated that in revising their manuscripts they had actually made changes they felt were incorrect.*

Keywords: *editorial peer review; journal editing; social construction of knowledge; publishing process*

In this article, I wish to briefly explore some relatively new dynamics that have changed the character of the manuscript review process and have potential for corrupting the management discipline's published record. These dynamics have, in turn, given rise to a mounting debate over the proper roles of authors, referees, and editors. In doing so, I draw on survey data collected from lead authors of articles published in the *Academy of Management Journal* (*AMJ*) and *Academy of Management Review* (*AMR*), over the period 1999 to 2001, to remark on various structural features that characterize the review process and contribute to specific sources of dissatisfaction in the relationships between editors and authors, and between authors and referees. In doing so, I do not mean to either put myself forward as a nonpareil judge or critic, but simply to make some informal observations, based on my experience as an author and editor, about various features of the manuscript review process as it has evolved over the past few decades. There are many reasons to be concerned with the editorial policies and practices of our discipline's leading journals. Chief among these is that "the peer review process is at the very heart of scholarly research" and its outcomes affect all members of our community of scholars "both individually and collec-

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tively" (Lee, 2002, p. 9). Moreover, the policies and practices of the discipline's leading journals affect its published record, as well as its public database. The latter, of course, provides a foundation or starting point for future work undertaken by other scholars as well as basis for practicing managers interested in understanding and applying current managerial thinking.

As management researchers, we regard the editorial policies and practices of our discipline's leading journals to be a reflection of its scientific norms (Bedeian, 1996). These norms represent standards of behavior and are part of what Robert Merton (1942/1973) described more than 60 years ago as the "ethos of science" that underlies any true academic discipline. In establishing editorial policies and practices, as argued, editors and referees possess considerable power over our discipline's intellectual vitality and future development. Furthermore, as also argued, the manner in which they perform their roles directly influences the careers of individual scholars vying for academic recognition. Given that the editorial policies and practices enacted by our discipline's editors and referees have important consequences for our common stock of knowledge and for recognition bestowed on individual scholars by our academic community, this study was designed to throw light on various aspects of the manuscript review process that have engendered increasing concern among established, as well as, aspiring authors. These concerns relate to such questions as:

1. Are recommended manuscript revisions ever based on editors' or referees' personal preferences?
2. What right do authors have to protect the intellectual integrity of their work?
3. Do some referees try to find things to object to in a manuscript just to convince an editor that they have done a conscientiousness job in preparing a review?
4. Do editors and referees treat authors as equals?
5. To what extent do authors feel pressure to conform to the personal preferences of editors and referees?
6. In revising their manuscripts, do authors ever make changes recommended by editors and referees that they believe are incorrect?
7. Are referees willing to consider new ideas relating to theory, study design, and analytical methods?

METHOD

To explore these concerns, early in 2002, an e-mail survey was sent to the first authors of all articles/research notes published in *AMJ* and *AMR* during 1999, 2000, and 2001. Dialogue commentaries and the prologues/epilogues written by editors of research forums were excluded, as they would not typically be vetted through the normal review process. Individuals who were first authors on more than one article during the study time frame received only one survey. A cover letter informed these authors of the survey's general purpose and that all responses would be anonymous. A follow-up reminder was sent 2 weeks after the initial survey was posted. Survey items were drawn from three sources: (a) the extensive literature on the manuscript review process, (b) two questionnaires developed by Bradley (1981), and (c) the writer's more than 30 years' experience as a former journal editor and continuing participant in the peer review system. A total of 288 surveys were distributed. Of this number, 179 surveys were sent to *AMJ* authors and 109 to *AMR* authors. *AMJ* and *AMR* authors were selected to constitute the target population for several reasons. As the discipline's premier journals, it would be expected that the articles published in *AMJ* and *AMR* would be read by a wide audience, be considered among the best in their subject areas, and represent models for others aspiring to publish at the highest levels. The conceptual reasoning and methodologies found in these articles would thus also be expected to have important consequences for the discipline's common stock of knowledge, as well as its future development.

It is recognized that the targeted population is not necessarily unbiased. On a practical level, however, without direct access to journal files, it is impossible to systematically identify those whose articles have been reviewed and rejected. At the same time, targeting authors whose works have been published avoids bias because of what has been called the "sour-grapes hypothesis," according to which authors whose work has been judged as inadequate engage in rationalization after reading reviews of their manuscripts (Levenson, 1996). Thus, if anything, survey responses from authors whose work was accepted for publication should lend a positive bias to the reported results, by avoiding feelings of rejection and minimizing feelings of anger.

The survey instrument contained 28 items. Of these items, 15 items asked that respondents reply with respect to "the most-recent, revised manuscript you had appear in either the Academy of Management *Journal* or *Review*." Eight items requested that respondents reply with regard to "your general experience as

a published author." The final five items asked the respondents to indicate their current rank, how many articles they had published in either *AMJ* or *AMR*, to indicate their primary Academy of Management division membership, and, in space provided for open-ended remarks, to add comments they might wish on their perceptions of the journal review process.

RESULTS

Of the 283 surveys successfully delivered, 173 were returned, for an effective return rate of 61.3%. Exactly 108 of 179 (60.1%) *AMJ* authors and 65 of 109 (59.6%) *AMR* authors returned surveys. The number and percentage returned by Academy of Management division membership were as follows: organizational behavior 47 (27.2%), business policy & strategy 41 (23.7%), human resources 16 (9.2%), organization & management theory 14 (8.1%), international management 10 (5.8%), entrepreneurship 7 (4.0%), organizations & the natural environment 6 (3.5%), managerial & organizational cognition 5 (2.9%), social issues in management 5 (2.9%), organization development & change 3 (1.7%), conflict management 3 (1.7%), technology & innovation management 3 (1.7%), organizational communication & information systems 3 (1.7%), gender & diversity 2 (1.2%), management history 1 (.01%), and careers 1 (.01%). Six respondents (3.5%) did not hold or indicate Academy membership. The distribution of respondents' ranks was as follows: full professor 52 (30.0%), associate professor 46 (26.6%), assistant professor 68 (39.3%), and graduate student 2 (1.2%). Five respondents (2.9%) were nonacademics. Perhaps indicative of interest in the survey's topic, 82 respondents (47.4%) provided written comments in the space provided. Selected comments are quoted later for illustrative purposes; however, because the survey was completed anonymously, these comments are presented on a nonattributable basis.

Results are presented in Table 1, which reproduces the actual survey instrument. Because *AMJ* and *AMR* authors responded similarly to most items, their responses have been combined. Table 1 gives the percentage of respondents selecting each response alternative so that, except for rounding errors, the percentages total 100. The actual number of respondents who selected each alternative is presented in italics and enclosed in parentheses. Due to an error in wording (corrected in the table), Items 25 and 26 are excluded from discussion.

The results indicate that *AMJ* and *AMR* are indeed seen among the discipline's premier journals, with an overwhelming majority (85.5%) of the responding authors indicating that they had not submitted their manuscripts to any other outlet (see answer to Item 10). An overwhelming majority (89.0%) likewise felt that the net effect of the review process was to improve the quality of their published work (Item 2). As might be expected of a group whose work was ultimately accepted for publication, more than two thirds (71.9%) felt that the editor's or the referees' comments concerning factual matters reported in their manuscripts were correct (Item 5). This same approval pattern is reflected in the belief that some (64.2%) or all (32.4%) of the referees assigned to review the authors' manuscripts were as competent as the authors themselves (Item 7). The authors also widely agreed that the referees (91.3%) and the editors (91.9%) in question had carefully read their manuscripts (Items 8 and 9). Further approval is evident in responses to Items 12 through 15, in which the authors expressed satisfaction with the consistency of the editor and referee comments among one another (62.2%), the willingness to consider new ideas (e.g., theories, study designs, analytical methods; 71.0%), referee objectivity (73.4%), and referee competence (80.3%). In addition, a majority (74.2%) of authors agreed that the revisions they were required to make in their manuscripts were beneficial enough to justify the additional labor and delay in publication (Item 11).

These positive responses noted, however, various concerns giving rise to this study were also recorded. More than one third (38.7%) of the authors reported that recommended revisions in their manuscripts were based on an editor's or a referee's personal preferences (Item 3). A full one third (34.1%) had likewise experienced pressure to make a revision conform to an editor's or a referee's personal preferences (Item 4). In line with the authors' responses to Items 3 and 4, almost 25% indicated that in revising their manuscript they had actually made changes they felt were wrong (Item 6). More than one third (34.1%) of the authors reported having been treated like an inferior by an editor or a referee (Item 20), and 56.1% felt that an editor had regarded a referee's knowledge about original research reported in their own manuscript as more important than their own (Item 19). Nonetheless, 56.2% believed that their judgment was probably

Table 1:
Survey of Academy of Management Journal / Academy of Management Review Author Editorial Experiences

Instructions: In responding to the following items please fill in ONE of the answer spaces. If you do not find the exact answer that fits your case, use the one that is closest to it. Please answer all items in order.

Answer Items 1 through 15 with respect to the most-recent, revised manuscript that you had appear in either the *Academy of Management Journal* or *Academy of Management Review.*

1. I will be answering the items in this section with respect to an article published in:
   Academy of Management Journal 62.4 (*108*) *Academy of Management Review* 37.6 (*65*)
2. The net effect of the review process was to improve the quality of the manuscript.
   Strongly Agree 57.2 (*99*) Agree 31.8 (*55*) Neutral 6.9 (*12*) Disagree 3.5 (*6*) Strongly Disagree .6 (*1*)
3. Recommended revisions in the manuscript were based on the editor's or referees' personal preferences.
   Strongly Agree 8.7 (*15*) Agree 30.1 (*52*) Neutral 31.2 (*54*) Disagree 25.4 (*44*) Strongly Disagree 4.6 (*8*)
4. No pressure whatsoever was exerted by the editor or referees on me to make the revision conform to their personal preferences.
   Strongly Agree 5.8 (*10*) Agree 28.3 (*49*) Neutral 31.8 (*55*) Disagree 24.9 (*43*) Strongly Disagree 9.2 (*16*)
5. The editor's or referees' comments concerning factual matters reported in the manuscript were correct.
   Strongly Agree 17.5 (*30*) Agree 54.4 (*93*) Neutral 20.5 (*35*) Disagree 6.4 (*11*) Strongly Disagree 1.2 (*2*)
6. In revising the manuscript, I only made recommended changes that I agreed were correct.
   Strongly Agree 20.8 (*36*) Agree 44.5 (*77*) Neutral 11.0 (*19*) Disagree 18.5 (*32*) Strongly Disagree 5.2 (*9*)
7. How many of the referees appeared to be at least as competent in the area in which the manuscript was written as you are?
   Some 64.2 (*111*) All 32.4 (*56*) None 3.5 (*6*)
8. The referees seemed to have carefully read the manuscript.
   Strongly Agree 41.6 (*72*) Agree 49.7 (*86*) Neutral 5.2 (*9*) Disagree 2.3 (*4*) Strongly Disagree 1.2 (*2*)
9. The editor seemed to have carefully read the manuscript (vs. simply summarizing, transmitting, and supporting the referees' comments).
   Strongly Agree 57.8 (*100*) Agree 34.1 (*59*) Neutral 4.0 (*7*) Disagree 2.3 (*4*) Strongly Disagree 1.7 (*3*)
10. To how many other journals had the manuscript been previously submitted?
    None 85.5 (*148*) One 11.6 (*20*) Two 2.3 (*4*) Three 0.0 (*0*) More than three .6 (*1*)
11. The required revisions to the manuscript improved it enough to justify the additional labor and delay in publication.
    Strongly Agree 33.3 (*57*) Agree 40.9 (*70*) Neutral 11.7 (*20*) Disagree 9.9 (*17*) Strongly Disagree 4.1 (*7*)
12. I was satisfied with the consistency of the referees' comments among one another.
    Strongly Agree 16.3 (*28*) Agree 45.9 (*79*) Neutral 19.8 (*34*) Disagree 12.8 (*22*) Strongly Disagree 5.2 (*9*)
13. I was satisfied with the referees' willingness to consider new ideas (e.g., theories, study design, analytical methods) presented in the manuscript.
    Strongly Agree 16.3 (*28*) Agree 54.7 (*94*) Neutral 19.8 (*34*) Disagree 8.1 (*14*) Strongly Disagree 1.2 (*2*)
14. I was satisfied with the referees' objectivity.
    Strongly Agree 11.0 (*19*) Agree 62.4 (*108*) Neutral 18.5 (*32*) Disagree 5.8 (*10*) Strongly Disagree 2.3 (*4*)
15. I was satisfied with the referees' competence.
    Strongly Agree 22.5 (*39*) Agree 57.8 (*100*) Neutral 12.7 (*22*) Disagree 4.6 (*8*) Strongly Disagree 2.3 (*4*)

Answer Items 16 to 23 with respect to your general experience as a published author.

16. If there is a disagreement between author and referee about a matter of opinion, the author should be required to conform to the referee's position.
    Strongly Agree 1.2 (*2*) Agree 4.6 (*8*) Neutral 12.7 (*22*) Disagree 57.2 (*99*) Strongly Disagree 24.3 (*42*)
17. A referee's judgment is probably better than an author's in matters where referee and author disagree.
    Strongly Agree 1.2 (*2*) Agree 5.8 (*10*) Neutral 37.0 (*64*) Disagree 40.5 (*70*) Strongly Disagree 15.6 (*27*)
18. Some referees try to find things to object to in a manuscript just to convince an editor that they have done a conscientiousness job in preparing their review.
    Strongly Agree 15.6 (*27*) Agree 48.0 (*83*) Neutral 21.4 (*37*) Disagree 13.9 (*24*) Strongly Disagree 1.2 (*2*)
19. I have felt that an editor has regarded a referee's knowledge about original research reported in my own manuscript as more important than my own.
    Strongly Agree 9.9 (*17*) Agree 31.4 (*54*) Neutral 29.1 (*50*) Disagree 26.2 (*45*) Strongly Disagree 3.5 (*6*)
20. I have felt that I was not being treated like an equal by an editor or a referee.
    Strongly Agree 11.0 (*19*) Agree 23.1 (*40*) Neutral 16.8 (*29*) Disagree 36.4 (*63*) Strongly Disagree 12.7 (*22*)
21. I have included a reference in a manuscript primarily because I hoped that its author would be asked to referee the manuscript.
    Strongly Agree 6.4 (*11*) Agree 13.9 (*24*) Neutral 9.2 (*16*) Disagree 33.5 (*58*) Strongly Disagree 37.0 (*64*)

Answer Item 22 only if you have refereed for a scholarly journal.

22. Have you ever been asked to referee a manuscript that you were not competent to review?
    Yes. (If Yes, go to Item 23.) 93 (*54.7*)
    No. (If No, go to Item 24.) 77 (*45.3*)
23. Given that you answered "Yes" to Item 22, did you still submit a review of the manuscript?
    Yes. 34 (*36.6*)
    No. 60 (*63.4*)

Table 1 (continued)

24. My current academic rank is:				
25. How many articles have you published in *AMJ*?				
0	1	2	3	More than 4
26. How many articles have you published in *AMR*?				
0	1	2	3	More than 4
27. Please indicate your primary Academy of Management division membership:				
28. Please feel free to add any comments you wish on your perceptions of the journal review process.				

NOTE: The actual number of respondents who selected each alternative is enclosed in parentheses and shown in italics.

better than that of a referee (Item 17), and 81.5% felt that referees should not have the power to make authors conform to the referees' opinions (Item 16).

Author responses also suggest editors may not necessarily know who would be a competent referee in a particular area. Almost 55% (54.7%) of the authors recorded that they had been asked to referee a manuscript they were not competent to critique (Item 22). Surprisingly, more than one third (36.6%) reported that they still submitted a peer review (Item 23). What relation this last statistic may have to the fact that almost 25% (Item 6) of the responding authors reported being asked to revise their manuscript by making changes they believed to be incorrect is an interesting speculation. A measure of gamesmanship is revealed in the responses to Item 18, in which 63.6% of the authors reported feeling that some referees try to find things to object to in a manuscript just to convince an editor that they have done a conscientious job in preparing their review, and Item 21, where more than one fifth (20.3%) of the authors admitted including a reference in a manuscript primarily because they hoped that its author would be selected as a referee.

DISCUSSION

The manuscript review process is a subject that does not want for controversy. Indeed, as these results indicate, although generally pleased, even those authors whose works have "successfully surmount[ed] the peer review process" (Lee, 2002, p. 9) have reservations about the outcome. Moreover, as several authors noted, they would have responded to various survey items differently had their manuscripts been rejected. Whether their judgment would then have reflected the sour-grapes hypothesis mentioned earlier or objective reality (or both) is impossible to say. In searching for reasons why such dissatisfaction might exist, various explanations suggest themselves. The fact that 3 of every 10 responding authors felt that recommended manuscript revisions were based on an editor's or a referee's personal preference, and more than one third had experienced such pressure to acquiesce that nearly one fourth had actually made changes they felt were incorrect, is disturbing. Despite protestations to the contrary (Mowday, 1997), the need to "publish or perish" that characterizes major research universities places enormous coercive power in the hands of editors and referees. This power was acknowledged in author comments such as

- "The pressures to publish are very strong. Reviewers and editors have the power to make or break your career."
- "I believe that *AMX* . . . has gone overboard in rewriting manuscripts according to reviewers' and editors' preferences."
- "In the end, [the editor] actually rewrote sections of the paper to include his preferred terminology. I'm somewhat surprised he didn't take authorship credit."
- "I would welcome a process and philosophy that is more respectful of authors on issues of preferences or opinion."

The notion that an editor's (or a referee's) demands for revision might be so overly invasive as to border on coauthorship is an issue I've addressed elsewhere in asking at what point detailed editing and reviewing end and ghostwriting begins (Bedeian, 1996). As someone who has been a participant-observer of the management discipline for some time, I have seen editor and referee comments become increasingly more detailed and demanding. Others have lamented the same trend and noted that it is common to receive a set of editor and referee comments that rival the length of a submitted manuscript (e.g., Biggart, 2000; Spector, 1998). In turn, author replies to editor and referee comments have, by necessity, grown more particularized and, in some instances, "lengthy companion documents that can be longer than the submitted manuscript . . . includ[ing] detailed background, ancillary

analyses, references, tables and figures that are not in the submitted manuscript" (Spector, 1998, p. 1). There is no question but that peer critiques are an essential element of the review process and that authors can benefit from suggestions that improve their work. One wonders, however, "if there can be too much of a good thing" and whether such a process "actually slows scientific progress by delaying publication, and discouraging many important findings from even attempting publication" (Spector, 1998, p. 1).

Whatever one's view in this regard, it seems indisputable that authors have the right to protect the intellectual integrity of their work. Moreover, in the opinion of some, "a failure to place the authorial voice at the center of a work" (Biggart, 2000, p. 2) is a real loss, with serious implications for the prerogatives and ethics of authorship (for more on this point, see Smith 1998). This is compounded by the realization that, despite their good intentions, referees' comments are nonetheless subjectively based. What one referee insists is the best way to address an issue, another may be equally adamant that it is not (or may not even see as an issue). In any case, the resulting manuscript may be as much a function of the idiosyncratic opinions of the referees selected to vet an author's work than the author's own intentions. Moreover, had the manuscript been read by another set of referees (according to their own subjective perspectives), the final product would likely be quite different.

This state of affairs is confounded by the belief that all too often referee comments are aimed at asking authors to write the manuscript the referees would have written rather than evaluating an author's work on it own merits (Leblebici, 1996). This belief is in no way assuaged by the condescending claim that reviews should serve a "developmental function" and that "developmental reviews are, in the main, teaching reviews" (Schminke, 2002, p. 487). Moreover, it is of no consolation to be told that no matter how one's career may be in the balance, journals also have a concomitant obligation to secure reviews from inexperienced referees as a means of "grooming" future "talent" (Schminke, 2002, p. 489). The notion that such referees, being in the minority, cannot "unduly sway a decision" ignores the fact that authors must respond to all referee comments, and thus the final content, if not outcome, of a manuscript will likely be affected.

Inflation in the manuscript review process may, in part, be a consequence of referees also feeling pressure to convince an editor that they have prepared a conscientious review (see, for example, Ashford, 1996; Romanelli, 1996). For ad hoc referees, in particular, impressing an editor as being one of the "best of the best" might garner an invitation to be an editorial team member (Lee, 2002). Colleagues looking for such recognition are further told that "a through review is expected to entail at least two pages of detailed feedback" and that "less seasoned reviewers only dream of completing a review in less than eight hours" (Kinicki & Prussia, 2000, p. 799). Comments from survey respondents confirm the pressure referees feel to be critical and to fulfill these expectations. As one offered, "I have, myself felt pressure to find criticisms in works to justify the quality of a review, suggesting there is 'criticism' bias in the review process." The pervasiveness of the belief that a criticism bias prevails is echoed in the view that "editors are 'looking for a reason to reject' manuscripts," and in other author comments such as "reviewers are more interested in slamming a piece than trying to figure it out," "reviewing is still mainly about 'stamping out vermin,' " and "in my experience editors and reviewers proceed on the 'guilty until proven innocent beyond any conceivable doubt' assumption."

It is of little solace that the tendency of editors and referees to "stress limiting aspects of manuscripts" (SLAM) has been documented in other disciplines (Van Lange, 1999). What is predictable, however, is that as a consequence of authors believing such a bias exists and even recognizing it in their own behavior, the objectivity of the entire review process is cast in doubt. This doubt is exacerbated by the belief among some authors that they have been treated as inferior by editors or referees and that their own knowledge about their own work was considered less important than a referee's. The fact that editors may not know who would be an appropriate referee in a given area is suggested by the 54.7% of the authors who indicated they had been asked to critique a manuscript outside their expertise. Such circumstances may account for the prevalent impression that the fate of a manuscript is determined more by the "luck of the reviewer draw" than its quality (Bedeian, 1996, p. 314). This, of course, again raises the question as to what important work, in such a system, fails to see the printed page. Author confidence that referees have at least peer-level expertise is further eroded when they are informed, that among those asked to serve as ad hoc referees, the "decline-to-review rate appears to be [positively] correlated with reviewing expertise, stature in the field,

and professorial rank" (Northcraft, 2001, p. 1079). This suggests that authors might, in fact, be justified in believing that their judgment may be better than a referee's, and that in disagreements with referees over matters of opinion, they should not necessarily be required to conform to a referee's position, some of whom may simply be seeking vengeance for the harsh treatment that they have suffered at the hands of other referees (Graham & Stablein, 1985).

CONCLUSION

As noted earlier, the manuscript review process is a subject that does not want for controversy. By and large, the system does work. At the same time, the survey results reported here do suggest that, although peer review is recognized as an essential quality control mechanism, various concerns relating to the proper roles of authors, referees, and editors remain unsettled. As also noted, these concerns have important consequences for our common stock of knowledge and for recognition bestowed on individual scholars by our academic community.

Editors are no doubt aware of the frustrations of aspiring authors. Referees (having been authors themselves) no doubt know the disappointment of a less-than-constructive review. This is not to say, however, that we cannot do better without sacrificing the perceived quality and reader appeal of our journals. Whether this circumstance results from our discipline's fairly low level of paradigm development, as suggested by Pfeffer (1993), is a possibility. Whatever the case, we should probably not be satisfied with a process that results in more than one third of the authors whose work appears in our discipline's leading journals reporting that recommended revisions in their manuscripts were based on an editor's or referee's personal preferences, and almost 25% indicating that in revising their manuscripts they had actually made changes they felt were incorrect.

Before closing, let me express an additional concern. This concern is related to a growing cynicism among graduate students and new faculty entering the management discipline. This cynicism is evident in the satirical portrayal of the manuscript review process as a game and a decreasing confidence in having one's work fairly and competently reviewed. Furthermore, realizing that the young are the lifeblood of our discipline, it brings to mind Herbert Simon's observation that "you can always tell a discipline is in trouble when the young people are cynical" (quoted in Biggart, 2000, p. 1).

I make the preceding case braced for the reactions it may evoke. Scientific journals are keystones in the edifice of any serious discipline. They serve as the published record of a discipline's accomplishments and determine the general course of its advancement. Publication is likewise a key ingredient in a successful academic career, influencing who gets promoted, who gets grants, and who advances professionally. The changing dynamics of the manuscript review process are, thus, too important not to be subject to full consideration.

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ARTHUR G. BEDEIAN *is a Boyd Professor at Louisiana State University. He is a past president of the Academy of Management, a former dean of the Academy's Fellows Group, a recipient of the Academy's Distinguished Service Award, a Charter Member of the Academy's Journals Hall of Fame, and a former editor of the* Journal of Management.