

Scholarly Reviewing and the Role of Choice in the Postpublication Review Process

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Publishers of books for the library and scholarly markets use prepublication reviews to reduce the risk of publishing a book that does not meet scholarly standards or is not economically justifiable. Book purchasers use postpublication reviews to reduce the risk of spending their budgets unwisely. Despite problems associated with both sorts of review, they are integral to the processes of scholarly communication and academic career advancement. The role and policies of Choice, a book review journal directed toward scholars and librarians of undergraduate-level collections, are discussed in detail.

Scholarly publishing is part of a larger system and institution: the academic appointment and tenure process, which includes the publication and review required of scholars to obtain tenure. Scholarly publishers are dependent on this system for their operation and financial survival. They provide the material for review and the framework for making public and disseminating research and scholarly writings that advance our knowledge of a particular area.

Scholarly reviewing is a subset of this publishing process and can be divided into two areas: prepublication reviewing (also known as refereeing), which addresses the acceptance for publication of journal articles and book manuscripts, and postpublication reviewing, which addresses the publication of book reviews. This article will discuss some of the major issues involved in postpublication reviewing—how seriously book reviews are taken in academe and the importance of book reviews in the scholarly communication network—and *Choice's* role as a major academic library review journal.

Background statements are presented on how scholars and librarians use pre- and postpublication reviews. A few of the major issues involved in prepublication reviewing—who should pay for scholarly publications (which encompasses the issue of per page charges) and the question of peer versus expert reviewing—are also provided to describe the prepublication process that helps shape the environment for postpublication reviewing.

Background

Reviews are used, before and after publication, to reduce risk when making decisions under conditions of uncertainty. Applying decision theory to reviewing,

in the prepublication stage, an editor (or publisher) will send an article or book manuscript to a referee for an opinion on whether or not to publish the work. In doing so, the editor is minimizing 1) a qualitative risk and 2) an economic risk. Qualitative risk refers to the variable quality of scholarship in a work under review. The editor of an academic book or journal has an obligation to maintain a high standard of scholarship in that publication. The expert opinion of the reviewer aids the editor in making a final publication decision and limits the possibility of publishing an article or book of substandard scholarship.

The economic risk associated with publishing an article or book is connected to the evaluation of its quality. If high-quality scholarship is maintained, the journal or book will theoretically attract a certain number of subscribers or buyers to fund the publication. However, a number of scholarly journals are not financially viable and are able to continue publication only with subsidies from their sponsoring society or association, an affiliated university, or even the authors of the articles.

In the postpublication stage, the scholarly book review decreases the likelihood that a librarian or individual scholar will purchase a nonessential journal or book. Purchasers as well as publishers look to the scholarly review to lower qualitative and economic risks. Although reasons may exist for acquiring a given work despite a poor evaluation, a negative review of a book can assist the librarian in minimizing the risk of buying a work of inferior scholarship and maximizing the purchasing power of the library's acquisitions budget. Reviews provide the same assistance to the individual scholar selecting a publication for a departmental or personal library.

Approval plans also factor into the library's acquisition and collection development procedures, increasing purchasing power but not necessarily quality. An approval plan is a method of acquiring materials in which a vendor preselects books, based on a preestablished profile of the library's collection and subject needs, and ships them "on approval" to a library. Such plans are designed with different sets of qualitative and economic risk criteria for each step in the flow of operations, from setting up the library's subject profile, to shipping the books that the vendor matches to that profile, to the library's final decision to accept or reject. These criteria include reputation of author, reputation of publisher, series, price, academic level, and subject area.

Approval plans, in some ways, undermine the minimization of risk that reviews provide, by shipping a book to a library before the book is reviewed in the scholarly media. Further, a library may sometimes keep marginal books, returning only those that are really inappropriate selections. Libraries benefit from approval plans, however, through reduced overhead and timeliness of books shipped. Timeliness has an economic attractiveness as scholarly print runs grow smaller and smaller (sometimes as few as 300 copies of a monograph) and scholarly reviews appear later (from an early five to six months, to as much as three years for specialized journals). On the average, scholarly reviews appear in print slightly over one year after publication of the book.¹

Scholarly reviews, even the belated ones in specialized journals, serve a second purpose besides minimizing the risk of purchase. The scholarly review places the

work within the literature of the field and indicates whether, in the reviewer's opinion, the work is of acceptable scholarship and advances the body of knowledge about a particular area, event, or scientific phenomenon.

Prepublication Reviewing

The question of who should absorb the expense of scholarly publication is being raised more frequently in light of increasing per page publication costs. Edward H. Berman addresses this issue of payment for scholarly publishing.² Considering the economics of publishing scholarship, he notes the following concerns: 1) the increasing number of manuscripts submitted for publication; 2) the cost of referees; 3) increasing manufacturing costs; and 4) declining print runs, which make it impossible to realize economies of scale. Scholarly publishers, forced to look for subsidies, have tapped several sources, including their own publishing programs. For example, university presses may subsidize scholarly publishing with revenues from their trade or commercial programs. The author's institution may also be a source of aid. Increasingly, institutions are setting up publication funds for their scholars, particularly if the areas of publication will benefit the institution's ambitions or plans for growth. The author's funding agency, or professional society or association, endowments, or grants are other possibilities for revenue. Finally, the authors themselves may subsidize publication.

Berman argues that increasing tenure-related pressures on junior faculty to publish makes feasible a requirement for them to pay for the opportunity of publication. Senior faculty also feel pressure when salary increases are tied to more stringent publishing criteria linked to the institution's scholarly aspirations. Further, it may only be a matter of time before journals in the "soft" sciences and humanities follow the practice of journals in the "hard" and behavioral sciences and charge fees for publication. On the other hand, the political economy of universities and scholarly publishers may squeeze out some productive lower- and middle-income faculty members from the publication process because of an inability to pay for publication.

The second issue in scholarly reviewing is that of peer review versus expert review, a distinction drawn by Bernard K. Forscher.³ The goal of the manuscript review process is to protect the literature and the reader from identifiable error, to reduce the risk the editor takes in deciding to publish a paper. To this end, peer review is not an appropriate method of protection; rather, the reviewer should have expertise in the topic of the paper or manuscript. The reviewer is likened to an expert witness testifying to a matter of fact. Forscher goes on to say that lack of agreement and/or variation in the opinions of reviewers judging a paper results in part from inadequate instructions to the reviewers as to what they should be doing in the review process.

Attitudes of scholars on peer review and publishing were presented as part of a survey of scholars' views on publications, computers, and libraries. The survey was conducted in November 1985 by the American Council of Learned Societies

(ACLS). A preliminary report was published in the Summer 1986 issue of *Scholarly Communication*, the newsletter of ACLS.⁴ Members of the ACLS are predominantly humanities and social sciences organizations, and scholars responding represent these disciplines.

In the survey, scholars expressed dissatisfaction with the peer review system. Approximately 75 percent of the respondents consider peer review biased in favor of certain groups of scholars, that is, those who are established researchers; those who use "currently fashionable approaches" to research or analysis; and/or those who hold a position at a leading university. Women think that bias in the peer review process is more of a problem than men do, and 40 percent of the academics responding feel that the peer review system in their discipline needs reform.

Postpublication Reviews

James Hoge and James West argue that the writing of book reviews is not taken seriously by university committees considering faculty tenure and promotion. Book reviews do, however, seem to count for librarians in academic institutions, and *Choice* reviews have been considered as publications for some of our reviewers at smaller academic institutions and occasionally for reviewers at research institutions. The Hoge and West paper centered on the formation of a new journal called *Review*, an annual published by the University Press of Virginia.⁵ The journal was created as a new forum exclusively for scholarly book reviews. As in writing a review for *Choice*, the reviewer is expected to place the book under consideration within the context of other publications in the field. Unlike *Choice* and other scholarly book reviews, *Review* does not put a word limit on contributions. This publication consists more of review essays than book reviews.

The issue of space limitation may contribute to the neglect of book reviews in the tenure process. A review of 500 to 750 words (and in the case of *Choice* 175 to 200 words), does not give a reviewer enough scope to develop a critical argument. Another reason academics slight reviews is that the review is generally regarded as opinion, however expert, rather than a scholarly contribution to the field.

Lengthier scholarly reviews are published approximately a year or more after publication. Assuming the reviewer did a good job, the critical task of these lengthier reviews is to place the book within the context of scholarship in the field for further use by new scholars and researchers. With a year to eighteen months between publication and published review, the book may be out of print. This, however, does not mean a work is totally unavailable to the scholar or academic institution. The maturation of the interlibrary loan process makes it quite likely that the scholar will be able to obtain a copy of the publication. The increasing business of rare book and out-of-print services, particularly those handling library accounts, also provides a good chance that the library will eventually be able to acquire the book. Hoge and West end their discussion with a call for the "reappraisal of the value of sound reviews," stating that "better reviews would help discourage imprecise scholarship and repetitive criticism."⁶

The last issue identified in scholarly publishing that affects reviews is their value to the scholarly communication network. The main players in scholarly communications are scholars and the vehicles they use to disseminate their ideas. In publishing, these vehicles are: 1) manuscripts sent out informally to a handful of colleagues for comment prior to formal submission for publication (a type of peer review process); 2) journal articles; 3) papers delivered at professional conferences and usually published in conference proceedings; 4) books; 5) book reviews.

Conference papers and journal articles generally represent new scholarship, or ideas on a new or existing concept. By the time the ideas have matured and a body of criticism and commentary exists, books begin to be published. The review of the book, at this stage of the cycle, represents the scholarly community's acceptance or rejection of, or reaction to, the concept.

Reviews are used by librarians not only to make a selection or purchase decision, but also to inform faculty of works published in their areas. They are important information vehicles tracking the development and progress of ideas in different disciplines and scholars' reactions to them. Some negatively reviewed books are considered for purchase for a library collection in order to house the controversial along with the established views in a discipline. Reviews play a part in the communications chain, assessing good and bad scholarship.

Choice Reviews

Choice reviews are generally the first scholarly reaction to a published work. The reviews in *Choice* can be viewed as both peer and expert reviewing: peer in the sense that frequently a faculty member at one institution is judging the work of a faculty member at another institution; expert in the sense that the review service *Choice* provides is based on obtaining an expert's opinion and evaluation. In most scholarly journals, book reviews are commissioned, and the review is not refereed prior to publication. *Choice* follows this model in commissioning reviews by selecting appropriate subject experts in the reviewer pool to assess a book. *Choice's* efforts are concentrated on selecting and reviewing material useful at the undergraduate level, an area where selection decisions are less easily made than they are for graduate programs.

Choice reviews books, databases, and other nonprint material in most subject areas suitable for an undergraduate library collection. The reviews are written by teaching faculty and librarians in U.S. and Canadian academic institutions. In 1984, *Choice* reversed a 22-year policy of anonymous reviewing and began publishing signed reviews, strengthening the value of a *Choice* review in the eyes of librarians and scholars.

Title Coverage

Choice reviews approximately 6,600 titles a year, 600 an issue. Using an average of 48,000 titles published annually over a three-year period,⁷ *Choice* gives a 14

percent review coverage. Eliminating fiction, children's books, and a few other commercial areas outside the scope of *Choice* brings the review coverage to slightly more than 20 percent of books published annually in the United States. The subject coverage coincides selectively with undergraduate curricula. Although it is not economically feasible to review all scholarly publications, *Choice* does publish more scholarly reviews than any other reviewing journal. *Choice's* emphasis and strength has been and continues to be reviewing books in the humanities and social sciences; the pure and applied sciences are covered to the degree that undergraduate-level material is published and available.

In the last three years, *Choice* has reviewed a total of 19,767 titles (averaging 6,589 reviews per year). The subject coverage breakdown by general area in a single issue of 600 reviews and a volume year of 6,000 is:

	600 (Single Issue)	6600 (Volume Year)
10% references, all disciplines	60	660
35% humanities	210	2310
40% social sciences	240	2640
15% science and technology	90	990

Publisher Coverage

Choice periodically surveys publishers who send books for review. Most books are sent automatically; others are requested by the editors from publishers' catalogs, announcements, and selected library and scholarly publications. *Choice* maintains active contact with those publishers the editors have identified as scholarly.

Represented in *Choice's* publisher file are the obvious (North American university presses and the major commercial scholarly presses) and the not so obvious (university departments, societies, and professional associations with active publishing programs). Small press coverage (literary and specialized) is extensive. The scholarly emphasis is balanced by contact with trade and mass market paperback publishers. *Choice* also reviews English-language publications from foreign publishers who have a U.S. distributor. With the internationalization of both scholarship and publishing, the monitoring of scholarly presses both in the United States and abroad becomes an ambitious activity for a scholarly review publication, albeit a necessary one to maintain a high level of quality in review coverage.

This publisher base provides a large universe of selection opportunities. The actual selections are based upon what is published and are limited to what is appropriate for undergraduate collections. *Choice* presently monitors over 2,100 publishers.

Scope

The selection policy *Choice* published in its September 1983 issue explains in detail the breadth of subject coverage in the publication.⁸ The main criteria used to

make a selection decision are content or subject area of the book; level; academic quality, including presence of scholarly apparatus; and imprint date.

The selections for review are made by six subject editors; most hold a subject master's and have academic library experience; only one of the six does not also have an MLS degree. Editors sift through scholarly, trade, and professional publications and identify materials appropriate for undergraduate libraries. In this preselection stage of the process, subject editors perform the quasi-peer review function of deciding what will be reviewed in the publication.

Reviewers are called upon, from time to time, to help determine the level of a book that the subject editor has sent out for review. Because the reviewers are active in undergraduate instruction they may choose not to review a book that they feel is too specialized or beyond the undergraduate level. Additional factors that go into selecting a title for review are:

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| 1. Date of publication | 7. Instructional manuals |
| 2. Place of publication, if not U.S. | 8. Well-publicized works |
| 3. Language (English language only) | 9. Popularizations |
| 4. Revised edition | 10. Materials for children |
| 5. Reprints | 11. Fiction ⁹ |
| 6. Microforms | |

Currency

Reviews appear, on average, five months after publication date. (An editorial in the March 1985 issue goes into more detail on the currency of reviews.)¹⁰ The timing of the publication of a *Choice* review is considered late for a commercial publication but early for a scholarly publication. Reviews fall into the middle of these two types of review publications. The currency of reviews is adequate for undergraduate institutions, and the reviews are also useful to larger institutions with approval plans. These organizations often wait for a review to order supplementary material.

Choice is presently investigating computer systems for automating the reviews and creating a searchable database with the full text of reviews. An objective of this planned automation process is to shorten the production cycle of the journal and to increase the currency of the reviews, with a target of publishing reviews three to four months after publication date.

Reviewers

Choice has 3,000 reviewers; 90 percent or 2,700 are faculty, 10 percent or 300 are reference librarians. These reviewers come from 864 academic institutions. Every state is represented, though not surprisingly the majority of reviewers are in the East. A gender breakdown shows that 690 (23 percent) are women and 2,310 (77 percent) are men. Virtually all hold the Ph.D. The average number of titles

reviewed per individual in 1986 was 2.5.¹¹ *Choice's* reviewers are actively teaching in the subject areas they review. The review service is designed to match a publication with its most qualified reviewer. Although they are unpaid, these reviewers are more than just a volunteer army. *Choice* editors go through a detailed selection process before signing on a reviewer. This includes vita evaluation and recommendation by an existing reviewer, another form of peer review. There is subject depth and continuity in the reviewer pool, and this continuity is a great strength of the publication. The recent survey (previously cited) of *Choice* reviewers finds that 1,380 reviewers or 41 percent have been reviewing for 5 years; 420 or 14 percent for 6-10 years; 420 or 14 percent for 11-15 years; 635 or 22 percent for 16-20 years; and 235 or 9 percent for 20-25 years. The average number of years a scholar has reviewed for the publication is 9.2 years. These reviewers have a knowledge of and experience with the publication's review expectations and a commitment to building high-quality undergraduate library collections.

Conclusion

Reviewing is an essential part of the scholarly publishing process. It will continue to be so, despite some inherent weaknesses in the practice, for a number of reasons. Reviewing in pre- and postpublication stages, whether peer or expert, attempts to provide some assurance of quality in research and scholarly writing. This is an essential component in the formula for advancing knowledge and is fundamental to scholarly publishing. Reviewing is also an integral part of the institution of academic appointment and tenure. Institutions, by their nature, create conditions and procedures that are difficult to change. Improvements in the reviewing process, however, can be made without disrupting the larger framework.

In the past ten years, the number of scholarly monographs published has declined while the number of articles and journals published has increased. This increase in manuscript submissions is due, in part, to the pressures of publishing and reviewing requisite to the tenure process. The increase has also been aided by technology that offers easier ways to develop and write articles and provides opportunities for self-publishing outside the peer review system. The peer/expert review process becomes more essential in this scenario in identifying scholarship that merits publication. The shift from peer to expert reviewing, argued by Forscher, should be championed by all scholarly publishers.

The book review continues to be an important link in the chain of scholarly communication. It is one of the forms used by scholars to comment publicly on a published work and to place the work within the literature of its field. Through this commentary, the book review assesses good and bad scholarship and aids in minimizing the risk to librarians and scholars in purchasing a work. *Choice* reviews, which are generally the first scholarly reaction to a published work, play an important role in this process.

Notes

1. *Choice* compared the currency of a sampling of book reviews published in ten scholarly journals and two library journals relative to the announced publication date of the books reviewed, with the currency of book reviews in *Choice*.
2. Edward H. Berman, "On Publishing, Probably Perishing, and Surely Paying," *Scholarly Publishing* 16 (July, 1985): 307-312.
3. This discussion draws on Bernard K. Forscher, "The Role of the Referee," *Scholarly Publishing* 11 (January, 1980): 165-169.
4. American Council of Learned Societies, "The ACLS Survey of Scholars: Views on Publications, Computers, Libraries," *Scholarly Communication* 5 (Summer 1986): 4-7.
5. James O. Hoge and James W. West III, "Academic Book Reviewing: Some Problems and Suggestions," *Scholarly Publishing* 11 (October, 1979): 35-41.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
7. *The Bowker Annual of Library & Book Trade Information*, 32nd edition, 1987. American Book Title Production 1984-1986, p. 412. The publishing output figures for the three years noted are: 1984—51,058; 1985—50,070; 1986 (prelim)—42,793.
8. "Choice Selection Policy, Draft 1983," *Choice*, September, 1983, pp. 29-40.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
10. "Currency of *Choice* Reviews," *Choice*, March, 1985, p. 935.
11. "Choice Reviewers," *Choice*, January, 1987, p. 723.