



Inside the Editor's Black Box: 10 Years of the *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management*

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ABSTRACT *To mark the start of the 10th year of publication of this journal, this extended editorial presents a short review of the contents of the journal through nine annual volumes, 41 individual issues and 321 contributions. The overall aim is to encourage new (and old) contributors and new contributions in the important and exciting field of environmental planning and management. It then opens up the 'black box' of the editorial process and explains what goes on inside the journal, in order to address authors' concerns about peer-review, refereeing and editorial decisions. The opportunity is also taken to comment on new—mainly electronic—developments in journal publishing.*

Introduction

Twelve months ago a caucus of pedants and kill-joys (as they were so denigrated) argued that AD 2001 is the true beginning of the third millennium (Royal Observatory Greenwich, 1999) despite the worldwide celebrations leading up to the start of AD 2000 (Steel (1999) argued it was neither but actually occurred on 25 March 2000). Whatever your view, the significance of 2001 for us is that it is the 10th year since the *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management* (JEPM) was transformed from a previous journal called *Planning Outlook* and given a new name, a new format and style, and a new outlook and agenda on research, policy making and practice in environmental planning and management. The 10th anniversary is being marked in several ways. The cover of the journal has been redesigned. The international advisory board has been refreshed. A 10-year index will appear in the final issue of this volume and will also appear on the journal's web pages in a searchable format (<http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/>) (we continued the volume numbering from the previous journal, should the coincidence of the 10th new volume and the current volume 44 confuse you). In this the first issue of 2001 I offer an extended editorial in which I do two things.¹

First, I review, briefly, what goes on outside the journal in the field of environmental planning and management. I base this mainly on a review of the contents of the journal through nine annual volumes, 41 individual issues and 321 contributions (I'd obviously need to wait until 2002 to make these figures 10, 47 and 366 respectively). In so doing I want to encourage new (and old) contributors and new contributions in this important and exciting field. Second,

I explain what goes on inside the journal, because I believe we can serve our contributors and readers better if they understand clearly what this international, peer-reviewed journal stands for and how it applies its policies and procedures. In passing I hope to dispel some of the myths and address some of the concerns which surround academic journals. These concerns include convictions or fears that reviews by referees may be arbitrary, that editorial decisions are biased or skewed by topic or methodological approach, that an author's status or prestige may improperly influence the outcome, or that the system is slow, conservative and structured to remove radical, innovative or challenging ideas (Van Lange, 1999; Wilson, 1999). In other words I open up the 'black box' of the editorial process to your scrutiny for, although the process is confidential, it is not secret. Academic publishing is a complex game and new authors need to learn the rules. I also take the opportunity to comment on new—mainly electronic—developments in journal publishing. I begin outside and then move inside.

Outside

Scope and Coverage

JEPM addresses the integrated planning and management of the environment. Papers are published which encompass applied research, the application of new approaches and techniques and the evaluation of policy and practice. The editors are also pleased to consider short reports, speculations and commentaries on any aspect of environmental planning and management. Contributions from integrated and cross-disciplinary research teams and from policy makers and practitioners are especially welcome. Specific topics covered include: environmental policy and legislation; sustainability, environmental change and environmental quality; environmental planning; natural resource planning and management; environmental and strategic impact assessment, project appraisal and auditing; environmental management; environmental economics, valuation and natural resource accounting; command and control and market-based instruments for environmental management; innovations in policy and in practice; and international and cross-disciplinary practice and integration. This listing is little changed since the journal was launched and remains a comprehensive summary of the scope of the journal.

Categories of Papers

A key *raison d'être* of the journal is to encourage cross-disciplinary, multi-disciplinary and integrated work, so any categorization of papers by content or authors is fraught with difficulties and in some ways runs counter to the aims of the journal. With that proviso I have sorted the papers published during 1992–2000, in order to give a flavour of the range of material published (and of author origins) rather than to offer a definitive analysis. Figure 1 shows published papers sorted by broad topic or subject type. Whilst year-on-year variations do exist, there are few clear trends. There appears to be a growth in papers categorized as covering 'waste and pollution' and 'people, politics, participation', although I cannot detect whether this reflects changes in authors' perceptions of JEPM as an appropriate outlet, or the quality of papers submitted,

or shifts in research trends and foci. The small decline, if such it be, is in papers categorized as 'environmental economics', and the same qualifications apply.

Classification of the published material into 'papers' or 'policy and practice' is done by the editor and is not always clear-cut, but 'papers' will generally have a strong theoretical or empirical content, whilst 'policy and practice' pieces, which are still expected to be analytical and critical, will usually have a more limited systematic research basis (76% of published items were categorized as 'papers' and 20% as 'policy and practice'). A very small proportion of items has been offered and published as 'comments and debates' (4%) and I would welcome more submissions in both the latter categories.

Categories of Contributors

The sex of the first-named and published author (where known) is 82% male and 18% female (83% and 17% respectively among all published authors). Thirty-eight per cent of published papers have one author, 36% have two authors, 18% have three authors and 8% have four or more authors. The continental origin of first authors is shown in Figure 2 and the disciplinary base of first authors is shown in Figure 3.² Most authors (approximately 80%) write about or use empirical data from their own country or continent, although some papers are wholly non-aligned or international in scope. We have no systematic knowledge of the ages of authors nor of their colour, ethnic origin, employment status or standing.

Issues in Environmental Planning and Management

The scope shown in Figure 1 is, I believe, a fair reflection of the field, and I cannot detect any significant differential in acceptance rates between categories. However, there is no agreed definition of 'environmental planning' (and management), internationally or nationally, and the field is diverse and complex. The journal is therefore always open to consider new material and new issues which bear on its comprehensive agenda. A current initiative by the UK Royal

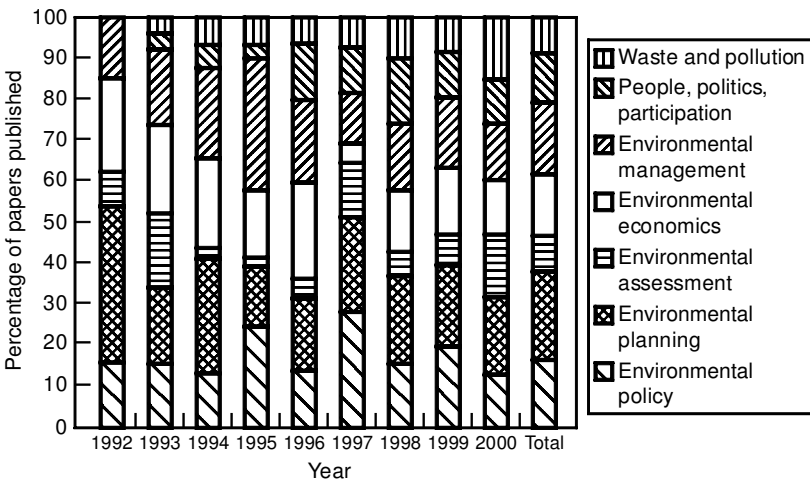


Figure 1. Categories of papers published, 1992–2000.

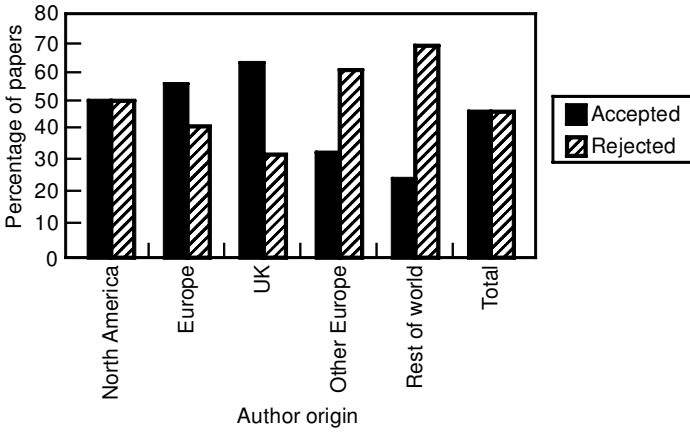


Figure 2. Paper acceptance rate by continent.

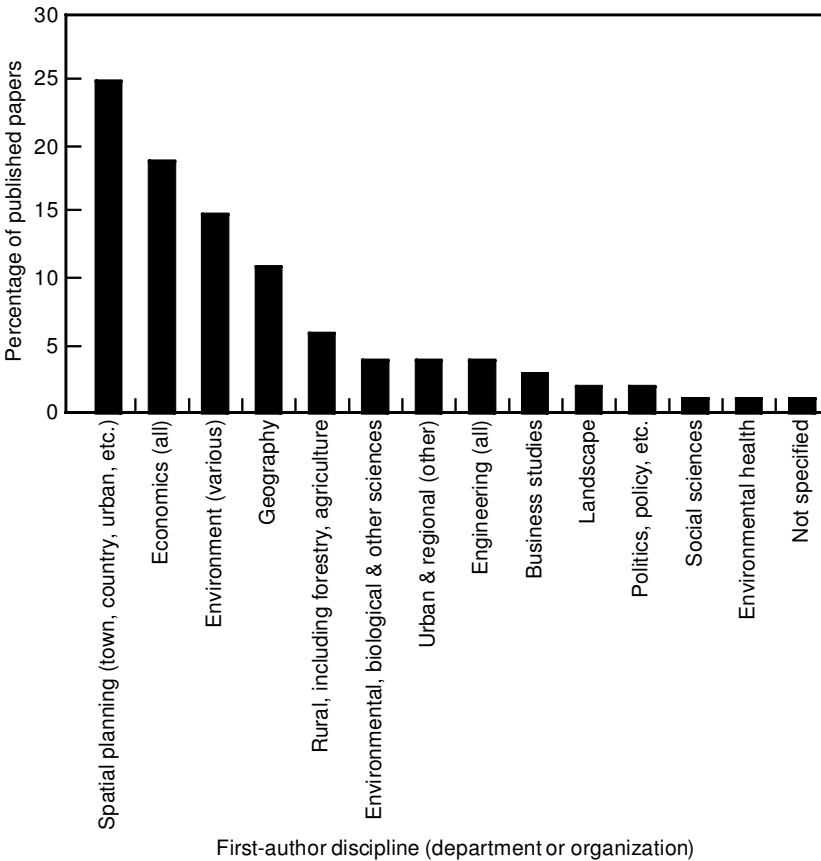


Figure 3. Discipline (department or organization) of first-named authors.

Commission on Environmental Pollution is examining environmental planning and several background papers (e.g. Farmer *et al.*, 1999; Nadin & Seaton, 2000) are a useful and contemporary source for the UK as well as internationally. The main conclusions of those papers can be summarized as: the need to improve integration between environmental, land use, economic, transport and other sectoral issues; the need for vertical as well as horizontal integration; the need to focus on the most effective ways of achieving sustainable development; the need to simplify or improve the complex and fragmented frameworks which exist (both legislative and institutional); and the need to improve environmental monitoring and information systems. Within those generalities, which are probably not controversial, there are a multitude of new and old issues and tools which require further research and evaluation, such as environmental visions, statements and strategies, fines and taxes and the role of target setting for sustainability. So whilst the primary focus of this journal is 'environment', a special interest is the link with social, economic and other aspects of policy making, planning and management. There is therefore no plan that the journal's broad agenda will change significantly in the next 10 years.

Inside

Introduction

Worldwide it is estimated that there are approximately 168 000 academic journals, which operate some system of peer-review and serve largely academic or scholarly audiences. Some are the first-choice publishing home for a specific society or interest group, whilst others, like JEPM, are independent and cater to a cross- and multi-disciplinary audience. This system has been subjected to much scrutiny, debate and criticism. JEPM is not immune to these debates and is sensitive to them. With several hundred subscribers in more than 40 countries JEPM is a small player in a large world market but, I hope, a significant player in its particular area. The journal's substantive aims are summarized in the 'Outside' section, but in terms of 'Inside', our aims and objectives are built around integrity and quality in every aspect of the operation of the journal. A first aim is to publish unsolicited papers submitted by authors. Occasional Special Issues (commissioned or from a conference) are published, but very sparingly, for too many of these would restrict the space available for unsolicited material, serving authors less well and for whom the journal is primarily intended. I do not intend to give any guidance on how to write for publication, except indirectly (Figure 4); copious advice exists elsewhere on this subject, some generalist and some specialist (e.g. A. Day, 1996; R. Day, 1998).

The motivation to publish is many-faceted. Aside from contributing to the fund of human knowledge and communicating with other researchers and policy makers or practitioners, authors publish in order to secure tenure or promotion (Forsyth, 1999), to help capture research grants, to achieve high ratings in research assessment exercises (Nadin, 1997), to become famous (or respected and esteemed), because they are contracted to do so, for personal satisfaction and perhaps to impress family, relatives and friends. I have nothing more to say, directly, about this plethora of publishing motivations, except to remind everyone that it exists and that any academic journal, including JEPM, sits embedded within this social and cultural milieu.

"In promulgating your esoteric cogitations, or articulating your superficial sentimentalities or expressing your amicable, philosophical or psychological observations, beware of platitudinous ponderosity. Let your conversational communications and your chirographical correspondence possess a clarified conciseness, a compacted comprehensibility and a coalescent consistency. Let your extemporaneous decanting and unpremeditated explanations be imbued with innate intelligibility and veracious vivacity without bombastic rodomontade. Eschew all conglomerations of flatulent garrulity, jejune babblement and asinine affectations. Sedulously avoid all polysyllabic profundity, pompous prolixity, psittaceous vivacity, clumpish jocosity and pestiferous profanity."

(Author unknown: courtesy of Professor Kenneth R. Brooks, Kansas State University)

"Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell."

(Strunk & White, 1979)

Figure 4. Advice to authors.

Submissions

A total of 672 papers have been submitted to JEPM between 1991 and 2000 and a first or later decision has been taken on 632.³ JEPM specifies a preferred maximum length of 8000 words for main papers; fewer is always better for the simple reasons that the space available is fixed and shorter papers allow more authors to be published and allow readers to enjoy more diversity in coverage. Many authors exceed this guideline, slightly or grossly, and a reasonable tolerance is granted, but I roundly reject any lingering feeling out there that the job cannot generally be done within the 8000 word limit. This paper is around 8000 words long. Most authors follow the guidelines or 'Instructions to Authors' which is important because it speeds the review process. Authors should remember that most readers are also expert and do not need a prolonged discourse on the context for most research. 'Say what you plan to say, say it, say what you've said'—succinctly—is the best advice I can give.

One of the most heinous crimes an author can commit is multiple submission of the same paper to two or more journals. Aside from being discourteous and wasting editors' and referees' time, multiple acceptances create serious copyright and precedence difficulties. We are only aware of one instance in the case of JEPM, discovered by chance, but we deplore the practice and counsel against it.

Speed of Publication

Authors want, above all, rapid publication. For JEPM, the average time from first receipt to actual publication is 12.2 months (during 1994–99 inclusive), a figure that appears typical of or better than many peer-review journals (e.g. Lessells, 2000). This average masks considerable variation: the shortest has been around 5 months and the longest 23 months (the latter a paper which underwent three revisions). All parts of the process take time, but we believe the main factor is often with authors, not with refereeing, evaluation or the mechanics or electronics of publishing. It is difficult to see how the overall figure can be reduced

significantly. For the review process we depend on human beings, and whilst e-mail and electronic submission, refereeing, correspondence and revision can be faster or more reliable than snail-mail (see later), most papers spend 90% of the time with people and only 10% of the time in transit. After acceptance, the publication process—scheduling, copy editing, type-setting, proof checking, printing and distribution—takes around 3 months and again, whilst disks and electronic communication can reduce this slightly and minimize delays, we do not believe there is immediate scope for any dramatic improvement. Wholly electronic publication is a related issue to which I return.

Rejection Rates

One of the metrics most often quoted or discussed in relation to academic journals, and an issue which troubles authors, is the rejection rate. I therefore take some space to elaborate. There is a general belief that high quality journals have high rejection rates and vice versa. There may also be beliefs that rejection is somehow undesirable and avoidable, and even that it is unfair, arbitrary, biased and corrupt. If the system is working well, bad papers will always be rejected (leaving aside for the moment any consideration of what 'bad' means). So a high rejection rate might mean authors are submitting many bad papers rather than that the journal imposes exceedingly high standards. But there is more to consider, beyond the issue of quality to which I will return.

First, consider the other reasons why papers are rejected. Every journal has editors, who exercise discretion on the choice of papers for review in relation to the aims and scope of the journal. They may reject papers which they judge are a bad 'fit', irrespective of the merits of the papers. The issue of the match between aims/scope and papers submitted is an evolving one and after 10 years prospective authors can scan past issues and judge whether their paper will 'fit', in principle, so this should be a decreasing problem. We rejected 21% of papers without detailed refereeing during 1991–2000, but this had fallen to 12% during 1998–2000. Sometimes authors may select a journal on title alone, or reputation, or the recommendations or experiences of colleagues, without making a careful evaluation of this point. For example, many journals have titles that belie their content (I avoid quoting examples for fear of giving offence) but readers can no doubt compile their own list. So an element of rejection is accounted for by inappropriate submissions. But in different disciplinary or cultural areas, especially multiple ones, there are also likely to be different perceptions between authors and editors of what is 'appropriate', so that rejection can also reflect this mismatch.

This evolutionary shaping of the coverage and content of a journal is of course dangerous and potentially misleading. It is dangerous because it can exclude consideration of papers on topics which on many counts should be addressed in the journal, and the editors have a special responsibility here to be alert to new and emerging areas. Authors should not hesitate to make a submission if they have a case to make on why an area previously absent from the journal should now be introduced. It is also misleading because, even if editors target particular areas and try to solicit contributions, the content is finally a reflection of what is submitted, not necessarily a reflection of all that is important. So, for example, a regular reader of JEPM might conclude, due to omission, that this journal does not carry papers on environmental policy in South America; however, the reason

is that no authors have submitted (acceptable) papers on that topic from that region.

Second, high rejection rates may result from a surplus of supply over demand. Every journal has a fixed number of issues, and space, each year. This journal currently publishes in six issues each year, with approximately 150 pages per issue and 900 pages per year. These figures are fixed partly by the supply of offered papers, but also, critically, by subscription numbers and subscription rates, budgets and the costs of production. Papers on average occupy around 20 pages, so each issue carries 7–8 papers, or around 50 papers per volume. It is obvious that any annual supply in excess of 50 papers will produce rejection, irrespective of ‘fit’ or quality considerations. In fact a supply well in excess of 50 is essential, so that the editors, and referees, have the scope to select on quality and not on the need to fill space. In an ideal world the rejection rate, based entirely on assessment of quality and relevance, will result in exactly 50 acceptable papers each year, but of course this is a counsel of perfection. If the acceptable supply increases, a journal has but three choices—increase the rejection rate, delay publication or increase the space budget—each with knock-on effects. *JEPM* increased from 2 to 6 issues per year during 1992–97 in response to supply, and may increase in future, subject to supply and market and subscription considerations. In the interim, a backlog of accepted papers may build, with undesirable delays for accepted authors and for new authors further along the supply chain. If the acceptable supply falls, there are also three possible responses—increase the acceptance rate (lower standards?), shrink the size or delay publication. Each response is undesirable, demonstrating the dynamic tension which exists between supply and demand.

A third factor is the prestige, imagined or real, of an individual journal. Visibility, publicity, speed of publication, as well as the quality of the content, abstracting and the effect of citation indices,⁴ and many qualitative influences, affect the reputation of a journal. Not unnaturally many authors want to publish in the best journal(s), and editors want to publish the best papers—a mutually reinforcing effect—so a journal which has built such a reputation might enjoy, other things being equal, a higher submission rate and, if it is not growing significantly, a higher than average rejection rate.

A fourth factor to be considered is broad disciplinary area. Studies have shown that there is a generally higher rejection rate among non-science and social science journals as compared to science journals. This is attributed, among other things, to referees in subjects like art, history and philosophy (and ecology, which Peters (1991) has castigated as an intermediate or soft science) applying subjective (and by implication inconsistent) criteria in evaluating their peers (Merton, 1973). By contrast, it is argued, the standards in ‘hard’ sciences are so well known that both author and referee work to similar criteria and are more likely to agree about the value of a manuscript. Thus (from Merton, 1973) rejection rates in hard sciences are low (27% rejection, n (journals) = 33 in a 1967 sample) and those in soft or intermediate sciences (61% rejection, n (journals) = 20 in 1967) and non-sciences (82% rejection, n (journals) = 28 in 1967) are high. Such aggregate statistics mask variation within categories: for example, rejection rates in the intermediate sciences category sampled varied from 48% to 70%. This journal is explicitly hybrid, and might therefore be expected to fall between the hard and non-science extremes if this explanation is held to be significant.

For all these reasons, the rejection rate of a journal is a complex metric which masks a multitude of influences. With that array of caveats explained, I can move on. The overall rejection rate for JEPM is 50% (or, if you prefer, the acceptance rate is 50%). It has varied over the last 9 years between 40% and 67%. The invitation and instruction to referees is strictly to advise on quality of content, quality of exposition and timeliness, so no referee is ever influenced directly by issues of strategic rejection rate. A referee may of course be influenced by a host of other factors which affect their recommendation, with an indirect effect on rejection rates; and the editors may, inadvertently, 'select' by not using referees who continually reject everything or those who regularly accept everything. In overall strategic terms, we have accepted papers on merit, not on the need to fill space, so the apparently precise 50% acceptance rate is fortuitous. However, there are differences in final rejection rate according to author origin (Figure 2). It is lowest for authors from the UK (35%, n (submitted) = 273), intermediate for authors from North America (50%, n = 127) and 'other Europe' (64%, n = 100) (i.e. excluding the UK) and highest for authors from 'the rest of the world' (72%, n = 121) (i.e. excluding Europe and North America). Because referees act blindly and report only on quality and timeliness, and the editors only rarely override a referee's recommendation, we believe that these differences are related to a combination of clarity of exposition (language), subject matter, quality and timeliness.⁵ We would be entirely happy to see a fall in the rejection rate from all parts of the world.

The discussion so far has implied that either/or choices are made in refereeing—either reject or accept. This is of course also more complex. Some papers are rejected, without detailed refereeing, by the editors as explained earlier. These numbers are 21% overall (but 12% during 1998–2000). A further batch is rejected, based on referees' recommendations, without invitation to revise. This figure is 20%. And a further batch is accepted, without revision or with only very minor changes, based on referees' recommendations, but these amount to only 7% of the 632 submitted and decided during 1991–2000. The majority—54% of the total to date—are first evaluated as either 'accept after revision' or 'for re-evaluation after revision' and many are eventually accepted (84% of those invited to 'revise and resubmit', and who do so, are eventually accepted). However, among these two groups, especially the latter, some are rejected after resubmission (6%), and some are never resubmitted at all (10%), forming a category of 'self-rejection' or withdrawal in that authors, with an invitation to revise and resubmit, do not do so. The reasons for this are hard to determine, but at least must include some combination of (1) frustration or irritation or dissatisfaction with the process, or the referees' comments, or the editor's decision, (2) lack of confidence that an acceptable revision is feasible, (3) a decision to submit elsewhere or (4) a decision to abandon the quest for publication.

It is in no one's interests for the rejection rate to be very low for this would imply, in such a complex, cross-disciplinary area as that covered by JEPM, a complacency which would be unhealthy or it would imply standards which, if not low, were so subjective or ill-defined as to be worthless; we judge this as extremely unlikely given the diversity of our contributors and referees. Nor is it in anyone's interests for the rejection rate to be very high. Whilst this might superficially imply extremely high standards, it could equally signify disarray in the editorial process, a complete absence of convergent thinking among the

environmental planning and management ‘academy’, and result in a journal which served neither contributors nor readers effectively. Contributors need to know that this journal will publish their work, provided that it meets (consistent, high, difficult and ultimately subjective) criteria of quality and timeliness, rather than appearance in the pages of JEPM being a lottery. Prospective contributors might also note in passing an obvious but little remarked point, that the editors actually want your contributions. The review process is constructed to encourage and select the best, and to help contributors move from a promising paper to an acceptable one. The system is not inherently hostile to contributors, and editors are not perverse sadists, despite any superficial appearances to the contrary.

My main point, then, is that you can read a number of things into JEPM’s rejection rate of 50%. As a crude measure it is broadly comparable to other journals, but it is the result of a complex and sometimes long process. We are aware of papers published in other journals which have been rejected by JEPM and imagine that the reverse must also be the case. This gives us no cause for concern, given the procedures which we operate and the diversity of reasons for rejection and acceptance.

Unacceptable Papers

I have referred to ‘bad’ papers but should more circumspectly refer to ‘unacceptable’ papers as well as saying a little more on this issue. Very few papers are ‘bad’ in the sense of being worthless or corrupt but a significant proportion does not meet the standards we set. Often the quality of presentation—the structure and language of the paper—is unacceptable, or the desired ‘joined up thinking’ is in some disarray. This can be repaired so long as the disarray is in the structure and language and not in the mind or work of the author. The editors are sensitive to authors whose first language is not English and they or the referees can help with editing, although there is a limit to the time they can expend or the skills they have if the intended meaning is not intelligible.

The second criterion for evaluation is the quality of the content. With such a diverse scope, JEPM does not impose detailed or inflexible criteria in this area, especially not between qualitative or quantitative approaches. Generally the following are expected: (1) the purpose of the paper is clear; (2) the paper makes a valuable, important contribution; (3) the contribution or significance is clear; (4) the paper is embedded in the relevant literature or policy or professional context; (5) the approach or methods, where appropriate, are explicit and sound; and (6) the discussion and conclusions are logically related to what went before. The quality of content is the key criterion and the area where there is considerable scope for variation in opinion by authors, referees and editors.

The third and final criterion for evaluation is timeliness. Repetitive work is valuable in that it can confirm or build a body of knowledge on a specific theme, issue or methodology, but there are limits. When a piece crosses a fine line to enter the ‘derivative’ category, offering nothing at all that is new or nothing which reinforces or develops a topic, then rejection might follow even if the paper is well constructed and argued. A further influence here, which is highly subjective and is with the editors, is our desire that the contents of JEPM reflect the disciplinary and geographical diversity of the contributors and the readership. So even a good, acceptable paper, with some novelty, but on a topic treated

extensively in the journal, might still be rejected (the editors try to ensure that such rejection is early rather than late in the evaluation process, to allow an author to seek an alternative quickly). Every reader needs to find something of interest in the journal, preferably in every issue, otherwise they will abandon the journal. This is therefore a difficult and fine balancing act, moderated by what is submitted and what is acceptable, and the editors' only metrics for judging their success are that authors keep submitting material and readers keep subscribing.

Referees and Refereeing

Refereeing systems vary between journals. In some, the referees are all members of the international advisory board (for JEPM, members of this board may act as referees, but they also advise more generally on the scope and quality of the journal, and on emerging issues in the field). In some, an editorial panel considers papers, and the merits of each paper may be discussed by a large group of people, remotely or in conference. For JEPM the editor or associate editor takes the editorial decision after receiving advice from, normally, two or sometimes three independent referees. It is important to stress that referees do not take the decision. Normally the editor will follow the referees' advice, for it would be perverse to do otherwise having asked for it, but sometimes the decision is not clear-cut. Especially in a cross-disciplinary area, referees may disagree. This may result in opinion being sought from a third, but this prolongs the review process. Sometimes an editor may rely more heavily on the advice of one referee rather than another—either positively or negatively—and just occasionally (very rarely) the editor might override all referees and take a contrary decision, again positively or negatively. All editors, and we are no exception, are therefore in both a sensitive and a powerful position. Sensitive in that we carry the ultimate responsibility for the journal and its contents, as well as its reputation and relationship with contributors, referees and readers. Powerful because our decision is final—the process operating here is not democratic, nor do we believe it ever will be or should be.

JEPM has used 596 individual referees during 1991–2000, from every continent except Antarctica, and from a host of disciplinary areas. The system used is a double-blind one—the author is never told who the referees are (unless, on special occasions, the referee requests a revelation for academic follow-up) and the referee does not, in principle, know the name of the author. The latter point needs qualification. Sometimes authors construct their paper, through their acknowledgements (which can be left off the first version of a paper for this reason), or the style or construction of their argument (“The author (Lastname, 1999) has previously shown ...”), or—more trivially—because they choose to use a header or footer on their manuscript containing their name (the editors detach the cover sheet/first page bearing the authors' details before refereeing, but cannot do more), in ways which enable the referee to know or guess intelligently. Authors who care about anonymity should therefore take care to preserve it as far as practicable. Further, an experienced referee can sometimes detect the identity of an author because of their knowledge of a field, a writing style or a particular viewpoint which is hard to disguise. The charge of favouritism for well-known authors could arise if referees can easily penetrate the anonymity and it can be levelled at the editors who are always free to ignore

a referee's recommendation. We cannot easily answer or rebut the favouritism charge with evidence but can point out that papers submitted by members of the international advisory board and by previous referees have been rejected by this journal.

The selection of referees by the editors is not an exact science but is both personal and evolving. We choose referees who we know to be expert, who we may know personally or through networks and conferences, who have acted before (efficiently and effectively), who have already had papers published in JEPM or who may be recommended by co-editors or advisory board members. We also use citations made in individual papers and, increasingly, the World Wide Web in identifying potential referees. Inefficient referees are not asked again (see below). A conscious effort is made to introduce diversity in terms of age, sex, discipline and location.

The work done by referees is confidential and unpaid but acknowledged in JEPM by our printing a list of referees in the final issue of each volume. This serves two purposes: it allows the journal to acknowledge the essential and valuable work done by referees and it allows all parties to see the diversity of those who act, offering some counter to suspicions of secrecy or potential bias. Because of the different time-frames during which referees act, when the list is published, and when the accepted papers are published in individual issues and volumes, it ought to be and is intended to be impossible or difficult for an author to determine which referee(s) reviewed her paper. Again the system we operate is intended to preserve anonymity and integrity, but cannot be perfect, and an author may guess a referee's identity from their comments or their judgements expressed on particular issues.

Why do referees referee? I think there are several reasons. First, it is a traditional and long-established system whereby scholars, as members of an international 'academy', act altruistically to advance the subject and help ensure only the best work is published. They expect their own work to be treated in the same way and so feel an obligation to reciprocate. Despite the understandable and personal pain which might accompany a referee's critique or rejection, authors who do succeed should gain a degree of satisfaction which is not available for professional or journalistic pieces (these serve an important, but different, purpose). The refereeing process can be and often is helpful and constructive; an author receives one or two or sometimes three, free, expert commentaries on their work, usually with constructive suggestions for improvement, resulting in (if the author persists and responds) an improved paper. Second, referees have influence (and may be flattered to be regarded as having influence—an esteem indicator) in that they play a part in shaping an academic or professional area. Finally, there are some personal satisfactions, and perhaps gains, in that they see work (especially good work) before publication.

A fear sometimes voiced by authors is that referees can steal or otherwise benefit, corruptly, from another author's ideas or results (Wilson, 1999). Corruption would arise, for example, if a referee plagiarized from an author, or recommended rejection of a paper which contradicted or would establish precedence over their own work, or allowed personal animosity or disciplinary or institutional origin to influence their recommendation. I raise these points, not to denigrate our referees, but to show we are alert to the dangers and by so doing to try to avert the problem. It is very difficult to be sure that the system does not deviate from the counsel of perfection we seek, for 'corruption' or bias

in whatever form is difficult to detect. However, our judgement and experience are that authors' fears on these counts are unfounded for the following reasons. First, authors should reflect that, whilst the editors are not individually specialist in every area covered by JEPM, they are sufficiently polymathic, intelligent and alert to the risks that they would normally detect a serious (and potentially biased) mismatch between a referee's evaluation and the merits of a paper. We have rarely received a referee's report which was explicitly derogatory or offensive, although some commentaries are often spirited and unequivocal and sometimes could display more tact. Second, the editors are always ready to hear a carefully argued response from an author that a referee has completely misjudged their paper, or demonstrated bias or worse. Whilst our editorial decision is final, and we are not offering a quasi-legal or universal right of appeal, we are always willing to listen and take account of an author's demonstrable and legitimate concerns. We select referees whose judgement we respect, who we judge to be expert and who we judge will act with honesty and integrity. Our experience is that referees fulfil all these requirements, and more.

The main fault demonstrated by some referees is not bias, prejudice, corruption or plagiarism, but tardiness. All JEPM referees agree to act in advance, and they are asked to respond within 4–6 weeks. Some respond much more quickly, some respond on time or only slightly later than requested (they are, after all, busy people, and are unpaid for their efforts), but a very small minority respond after an interminable delay or not at all. In general the latter—recalcitrant referees—will never be asked to act again, and it is hard to know why they agreed to act in the first place, but this is small comfort to the author for whom prompt publication is important and whose paper is delayed for reasons outside an editor's immediate control. Of the referees asked and agreeing to act during 1991–2000, less than 10% performed so slowly or not at all that they have been 'struck off' our list.

Alternative Refereeing Systems

Peer-review is integral to most aspects of academia and a detailed review by a working group in the UK (Working Group on Peer Review, 1990) concluded that it is the only practicable method of assessment in the field of (basic) research, but that it is imperfect. Such imperfections include the possibility of systematic bias against young researchers, unorthodox research, new research areas and interdisciplinary work, and the difficult balance between trust and credibility on the one hand and openness and transparency on the other. Journal peer-review has an important, double role: it protects the author from publishing and the reader from reading papers that are not of sufficient quality (Harnad, 1998). We therefore make no apology for operating peer-review.

The scrutiny and debate surrounding academic journals sometimes suggest alternatives or variants to this system. For example, that the refereeing process should be open so that a referee would need to write in the knowledge that authors (and others?) would see their report. Experiments have claimed (e.g. Walsh *et al.*, 2000) that there are no disadvantages in this system, and there may be advantages in that signed (i.e. open) reviews were of higher quality, were more courteous (but took longer to complete than unsigned (i.e. anonymous) reviews) and that reviewers who signed were more likely to recommend

publication. However, whilst any risk of bias or corruption might be reduced, referees might be inhibited from providing a full and frank evaluation. With the identity of an author revealed to a referee, the risk of bias might even be increased, but could be manifest in different or more subtle guises. The debate will no doubt continue; meanwhile, JEPM will continue to operate a double-blind system.

It has been suggested that authors be invited to nominate their own referees (who would of course be required to be independent of the author or their institution (although how this might be tested is unclear)), with the editors choosing one such nominated referee and perhaps one other. We understand some journals already use this practice and the UK Economic and Social Research Council uses this system for evaluating research grant applications. We feel it might have some potential for papers and would be pleased to hear prospective authors' views.

A further suggestion, which can only work electronically, is some process of 'public refereeing' or review. Authors or editors would post a submitted paper onto a web site; individuals (who might volunteer and be selected), or anyone (i.e. a form of 'peer commentary' rather than formal 'peer review'), would be invited to review, comment on or evaluate the paper. The author would then revise and a new, improved and final version would result. Aside from whether authors would be willing to do this, and whether sufficient referees would (always) be willing to respond, several issues arise. Would there still be a final 'editorial decision' to be taken? What would the timescale be and when would 'closure' occur? Even at the end of this process, could a paper be rejected? If so, a web site would need to distinguish clearly between submitted papers, accepted papers and many variations in between. Would all the material and comments from the whole, complex, intermediate process be in the public domain? Authors are of course free to do this now, using their own web sites. The only difference would be that the process was systematized and moderated by editors? Variants of this system already occur and are well established in principle. Many specialist groups of researchers share preprints or drafts, preliminary findings are presented at conferences and workshops, and most researchers share their work with colleagues, informally or formally. These remarks will show that whilst we as editors are interested in these ideas, we are not so far convinced that the supposed advantages outweigh the potential disadvantages.

Electronics

Whilst the electronic revolution is creating or reinforcing new ideas and debates on the principles of peer-review (above), it also creates new opportunities and raises issues for the process of peer-review, and for publishing (Cox, 1997). Wholly electronic peer-reviewed journals (ejournals) have been in existence for little more than 10 years but a study has shown that, with a few possible exceptions, their (citation) impact thus far on scholarly communication has been minimal (Harter, 1998). Of course that is not to say that this will not change, and perhaps rapidly, in future.

The number of ejournals is increasing, and the vast majority of printed journals are now also available electronically (JEPM has been available online since Volume 38 at <http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/>). This system appears to

serve the different needs of readers and authors well (Gomes & Meadows, 1998), but the ultimate dominance of ejournals may be inevitable. The issues are linked with library budgets (which may be shrinking) and the number of journals (which is increasing), but Pikowsky (1997) believes that ejournals will co-exist with print journals for the foreseeable future. Complex copyright issues also arise (e.g. Harnad, 1998) which are beyond the scope of this paper. One proposal is that library and other subscriptions should be replaced by payments or subsidies made by authors, a feature of some journals already, but not of JEPM. However, opinion on the merits of this route forward is divided (Harnad, 1998; Henderson, 1998).

Especially for JEPM, the sustainability agenda, and paper waste and pollution from the printing process, among other factors, might suggest that wholly electronic journal delivery cannot come soon enough. However, questions raised by our own contributors on, for example, the merits of alternative ways of treating paper waste (Leach *et al.*, 1997; Leach, 1998; MacGuire & Childs, 1998) show that the issues are complex and the solutions are not straightforward. Ejournals are only theoretically 'paperless' in production and publication; in use they could conceivably consume more paper than a printed journal unless users confined their reading to a screen.

A future development for JEPM will surely be wholly online paper submission and peer review, where author submissions, refereeing, revisions and editorial decisions are executed entirely electronically. This is happening now for some journals, and initial reports are favourable (Wood & Hurst, 2000). Whilst JEPM is using these tools extensively, we intend to wait until we have more confidence that such procedures will not exclude either authors or referees, and that the software and manuscript management procedures are robust and secure, before making a strategic move to such a system.

Conclusion

A successful international, peer-reviewed academic journal depends on five key, inter-related and essential components—authors, referees, advisors, readers and a publisher—mediated through a team of enthusiastic editors, and the watchwords of all should be integrity and quality. We believe JEPM has each. Continued success also depends upon a flexible, sensitive and evolving approach to changing needs in each area, whilst maintaining integrity and quality. Our ambition is that JEPM is and will continue to be founded and prosecuted on these principles. The editors are therefore always open to suggestions and are pleased to discuss issues or emerging concerns with authors, referees and readers.

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Notes

1. Although this paper has been written by the editor-in-chief, it summarizes the overall policies and practices of the journal which are shared and fully endorsed by the associate editors and other members of the editorial team.
2. Only the author's department or agency can be so categorized, which of course will distort the impression given by Figure 3 when, for example, an ecologist is writing from a department of spatial planning.
3. The census date is June 2000. The base number for reported statistics varies because some papers are still under review or revision. Totals do not always equal 100% due to rounding.
4. We and our publisher have been making strenuous efforts to have JEPM adopted by the Institute for Scientific Information (ISI) in order to extend abstracting and appearance in citation indices, so far without success. Despite this, JEPM is noted and abstracted widely and extensively (see reverse of contents page in each issue).
5. It is our intention to carry out a multi-variate analysis of journal statistics to test for the effects on acceptance and rejection, if any, of paper and author characteristics, but this is beyond the scope of the present paper.

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