THE ONE ARTICLE AT A TIME TO A 'CUSTOMER' RULE IN ACADEMIC JOURNALS¹

By Walter E. Block²

Abstract:

Some journal editors of periodicals ostensibly libertarian oriented yet practice an editorial policy with would be in other contexts seen as anothema to this philosophy: to wit, affirmative action. The present paper documents this case, offers a criticism of this practice, and considers several objections to its thesis.

Key words: Libertarianism, affirmative action, editorial policy, refereeing

JEL category: A11

What is the purpose of an academic double-blind peer reviewed journal in an academic journal, such as the present one, in which this article now appears? This question can be addressed in two different ways, positively and normatively. In the former case, we look into the actual motives, purposes, of the editor in charge of the operation; in the latter, we consider what his goals *should* be. The positive analysis admits of many answers, as many as needed to describe the aims of all editors of publications of this type. Given human heterodoxy, these must be many. But let us list just a few. Primary amongst them, and the purpose to which most editors would readily admit, is to create the most excellent journal possible. It should be filled with material that pushes out the frontiers of our knowledge about the given science, academic discipline, or other related subjects. Of course, this is as stated a vague aim; we all know what it means, but it is difficult to specify, since if we know what this meant precisely we would all write such articles ourselves, there would be no real need for editors or referees. However, we can operationally define this. For example, in terms of citations.³ The more responses a given refereed publication garners, other things equal, the more profound it is; the greater its contribution to its field. Similarly, citations in more prestigious venues count for more in this regard than lesser valued ones.

¹ I thank a referee of THIS JOURNAL for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. All remaining errors are my own responsibility, of course.

² Walter E. Block, Ph.D., Harold E. Wirth Eminent Scholar Endowed Chair and Professor of Economics, Joseph A. Butt, S.J. College of Business, Loyola University New Orleans, 6363 St. Charles Avenue, Box 15, Miller Hall 318, New Orleans, LA 70118, tel: (504) 864-7934, fax: (504) 864-7970, wblock@loyno.edu

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What other less salutary editorial motives are there? There would be mere aggrandizement, whether personal or institutional. A successful journal will lend prestige to its editor, publisher, academic sponsor. Then, some editors might be motivated by a desire to reward friends and punish enemies. For let us face facts, the editor can place his thumb on the scales of justice in his choice of referees. Double blind referring is not impervious to the editor's choice of referees. If he does not wish to have an article see the light of day in his periodical, he can refer it to a scholar who, based on his past experience with referee's reports, "hates everything." If he has the opposite motive, he can resort to the exact reverse tactic.

Has it ever happened that an editor shepherded an article through the refereeing process that was written by a beautiful woman with the aim of ingratiating himself with her? One would hope not, although surely, the human condition being what it is, it would be extremely unlikely in the history of economic⁴ journal publication that this had never happened. Nor can we dismiss out of hand some editors either helping along in this way, or undermining, based on his preferences, articles written by blacks, whites, gays, straights, and the old, the young, or member's of one's political party.

Let us now attempt to wrestle with the question from the normative point of view, adopting my own preferences in this regard.⁵ The goal of a journal in economics should be to maximize our understanding of, maybe love for (14), the dismal science. Articles should appear there that push out the envelope, that apply economic theory to terrain never before approached (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 27, 28) to refining our analytic tools, to solving important intellectual challenges (reducing the number of needless deaths, dealing with economic depression, with unemployment, and inflation). I don't wish to argue about which of these (slightly different) aspects contributes more to excellence than any of the others. That is for a different essay. Instead, I am trying to posit a consensus; I am relying on what I perceive to be a broad agreement as to how excellence in the profession would be defined by most of its membership.

The reason I am doing so is that I want to contrast this rough, vague, somewhat heterodox view of promoting excellence with a very different policy, one actually pursued by several journals in economics, political economy, philosophical economics, and libertarianism. In a previous version of this article, I had stated at this point: "I will not mention any names in order to protect those who are guilty of taking this alternative stance." I have, however, changed my mind on this. These are the official policies of these three journals: *Journal of Private Enterprise*, *Quarterly Journal of Austrian Economics*, and *Journal of Libertarian Studies*. That being the case, why not name them?

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⁴ I am an economist. I am biased in favor of this discipline. But, I mean this paper to be applicable to all fields of academic study; the non economist reader is invited to extrapolate.

⁵ There are many other perspectives from which we could address this issue; will publication help or hurt the revolution (please don't ask which revolution)? Will it promote liberty? Egalitarianism?

⁶ For the official descriptions and instructions to authors, of the *Journal of Private Enterprise*, see http://www.apee.org/journal-private-enterprise.html, http://mises.org/web/3328. None of any of APEE's instructions to authors, official descriptions, mention this one to a customer at a time rule. My knowledge of this rule comes from personal communication with it editor, Edward Stringham. A similar situation

This is what I call the "one article to a customer at any one time" rule. In its extreme form it works like this. Economist A submits article I to journal A at time T1. He may not offer another article (II) of his to this journal until article I has been rejected or published. What is the actual time duration between t₁, submission and t₂, rejection? This can be any where from one week, if the editor rejects the paper before sending it to a referee, up to six months for a lazy referee's first report, to a year, if there are revisions called for and supplied, but then, finally, the paper is rejected. I have had papers rejected that have been in a referee process of this sort for as long as two years, but this is rare. What is the time span between t₁ and t₃, actual publication? For journals that appear in hard copy format, this can take anywhere from 1 to 3 years, call it 2, on average. So what is the upshot of this rule? It means on average that a scholar cannot submit more than one article per year in cases of rejection, and no more than one article every two years, in those cases where his initial submission is published.

How does this rule square with the goal of "excellence" discussed above? Not too well. Suppose there were now active an economist X who combined the ability and work ethic of Mises, Hayek, Friedman, Becker, Buchanan and Rothbard. That is, X could produce material at the rate of all six of these men, *combined*; e.g. a total output per time period equal to six times the amount of the average of these half dozen scholars. And, as to quality, his writing would exceed any of theirs. X submits article I to Journal A. It is accepted. It is published, say, 2 years later. X may not submit any other article, II, to A, until this time period is up. Without this rule, let us posit an article of his could appear in A every single issue, rather than once every two years.

Which of these results is more conducive to the excellence of A? To ask this is to answer it. The "one at a time to customer" rule will reduce quality below that level that would otherwise prevail, given that X is by far the best economist on the planet. Full disclosure here: One of my motivations for writing this present article is that I have been victimized by that rule. More than just a few times, articles of mine have been summarily rejected because there was one written by me already in the referring publishing

prevails with regard to the Journal of Libertarian Studies; its write up

(http://mises.org/periodical.aspx?Id=3) contains no mention of this policy. My knowledge of this rule comes from personal communication with it editor, Tom Woods. In contrast, the QJAE is very explicit about its affirmative action policy. It states: "The QJAE will not consider more than two articles by a single author, whether as sole author or co-author, at any given time. The QJAE will not publish more than two articles by a single author, whether as sole author or co-author, per volume" (see http://mises.org/periodical.aspx?Id=4.)

⁷ In a more moderate version of this rule A may not submit II to B until I is rejected or accepted in final format, ready for publication.

⁸ For electronic economic journals this time period can be far shorter. Thus, "open access" and "open review" journals fall within this purview. The former can be defined as those that are available online to the reader "without financial, legal, or technical barriers other than those inseparable from gaining access to the internet itself" (Wikepedia). In the latter case, letters between referees and authors are published, on the journal's web, and thus are made available to the entire community of scholars, but this is done on an anonymous basis to preserve referee anonymity.

pipeline. Another motivation for writing this article is to criticize what I consider are unfair editorial decisions.

Why, then, would an editor make this choice? It cannot be due to self or institutional aggrandizement, because this lies in the direction of excellence.

One hypothesis is that those editors are enamored of affirmative action. ¹⁰ But not for racial or ethnic minorities or women, or any of the other "usual suspects." Who, then? When we ask qui bono, things become more clear. Which scholars benefit from the reduction of the publications of X, or more generally, the Xs? Why, the non Xs, of course. Thus, the one submission at a time to a customer rule benefits the non Xs, those with lesser ability as economists, or, at least, those whose productivity in terms of quantity is below the average. The rule is akin to affirmative action for relative mediocrities, relative to X, of course. It is almost as if these editors are playing the role of a Randian villain, promoting the careers of the Wesley Mouches and the Mr. Thompsons, while holding back the Ragnars and the John Galts. Certainly, they are hijacking the goal of excellence ¹¹ for their journals, in favor of affirmative action for the less able.

Let us consider several objections to the foregoing:

- 1. But suppose X writes one article per day, and submits 30 of them per month to Journal A. The sheer enormity of this output would overwhelm any reasonable refereeing system, to say nothing of the fact that A is a quarterly. One solution to this conundrum would be to charge money for the service or refereeing. Many journals already do so, to be sure, for very different reasons; there is no reason why the most prestigious journals could not follow this path. Here, we stipulate that while X may be a superman in terms of research and writing productivity, he is no richer than anyone else.
- 2. But suppose that in addition to being productive and accomplished X is also very wealthy. No referring charge would dissuade him from making 30 submissions per month, every month.¹²

Here are two possible replies. First, charge on an increasing scale, a "progressive" fee. The more submissions the higher the marginal price. But this is too similar to affirmative action; it would be akin to progressive prices: Bill Gates pays \$1 million for a loaf of bread, the middle class man is charges \$1, and the poor \$.01. Down that path lies absolute income equality. Another possible solution is to charge a price for referring; the same for everyone rich or poor, but one sufficient to defray the costs of hiring a sufficient number of referees to accommodate Professor X. This is far better, in that it is not an example of affirmative action for the mediocre.

⁹ Please do not think that I equate myself with economist X in any way, manner, shape, or form.

¹⁰ For a critique of affirmative action programs, see 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 18, 20, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 30, 31, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45.

¹¹ However this is defined.

¹² I realize the numbers are a bit off, even for illustrative purposes. No half dozen economists, even all put together, write a daily article; maybe a monthly one, though. I plead poetic license on this.

3. But suppose X's articles are so good, head and shoulders above everyone else's and so numerous that they freeze everyone else out of Journal A. This periodical would in effect become the X Journal, instead of Journal A.

Well, so what? What is wrong with that? If a music publishing house that previously featured the works of a whole host of composers only focused on X, (here, a composite of Bach, Mozart, Handel, Vivaldi, Beethoven, and Scarlatti to name my 6 favorite composers) it would become justifiably famous. Why shouldn't Journal A restrict itself to publishing X and no one else? If it is serious about excellence that is precisely what it would do.

4. Suppose X was so productive that he could fill *all* economic journals with his words. In this scenario, no other economist could be published at all.

My response is "Publish X and be damned." Let us ask, what is the purpose, normative question here, of the entire economics profession? In my view, it is to maximize the excellence of all of its output. If this can be done by X, alone, well, then, so be it. So much the worse for all the rest of us economists. Do we, as a profession, not support competition? That the best way of achieving this goal of excellence is with Professor X alone should not give us any pause for thought (except at the unlikelihood of the entire scenario). But given this implausible example, then we may deduce our conclusion: under our wild and crazy heroic assumption it logically follows, if we want to promote excellence, then X is our man, our *only* man.

If there were a physician, Y, who all on his lonesome, could cure the maladies of the entire human race, would we hold him back with restrictions of the one publication at a time to a writer type? Here, the parallel would be not to allow Doctor Y to have too many patients, even though he could treat them better than any one doctor, or even all of them put together. If this is not an unwise and improper restriction on entry (19) then nothing is.

But we need not worry about economist X or Doctor Y, hogging up all the journal pages, or all the sick people, respectively. As firms get larger, and this applies to X and Y, and their ilk, their sheer size¹⁴ involves them in the problems of central planning that cannot be solved (29). This ought to put paid to Professor X or Physician Y.

5. The problem with statist affirmative action policies is that they are compulsory. They come to us at the point of a gun. But the affirmative action policies adopted by these editors is purely a *voluntary* one. As such it is entirely compatible with economic freedom and libertarianism.

These analyses of the One Big Firm underscores the extreme unlikelihood, not to say, impossibility, of this scenario: 17, 21, 32: 544-550

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¹³ This is based upon the reply of Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington, to a would be blackmailer; http://www.quotationspage.com/quote/14599.html

Perhaps. But maybe not. These editors do not *own* their respective journals. They are not principals; rather, they are agents. If the owners of the journals know full well that their editors are not unambiguously pursuing excellence, but are rather seeking this goal subject to the side order condition that the Xs of the world must be kept in their proper place, then there is no fraud being perpetuated.

But suppose they do not know any such thing. Then, the editors are engaging in fraudulent practices against their owners. The analogy is the payola case (34). The disc jockey is paid by the radio station to play the "best" songs (34: chs. 17, 33). If he deviates from this by one iota -- by giving extra time to his friends or to those who pay him to play their songs-- instead of broadcasting the very best, for example only Elvis, Frank Sinatra and the Beatles - - he is cheating his employer. Note, he is not practicing fraud on other rock groups who have no right to be heard on this or any other radio station.

Now consider the case where the publisher neither knows not cares about this editorial rule being employed by our affirmative action editors. What can we now say about these policies?

For one thing we can criticize them on the grounds that they are betraying an implied trust. Even if the publisher does not care, still, when you place "economics" or "libertarianism" in the title of your journal, and yet allow other considerations to deter you from the single minded pursuit of promoting these callings to the best of your ability, there is a failure to live up to the expectations engendered by the journal titles. Would this be a crime in the libertarian legal code? Of course not. But the libertarian legal code by no means exhaustively prohibits all improper behavior.

For another, it is more than passing curious that economists, historians, philosophers who are also libertarians should adopt affirmative action policies as their own. Yes, yes, we were all told to dance at least one time with the ugly girl, and this is all well and as it should be, in my own normative view of affirmative action. But to employ this policy in the present context is quite a stretch from that scenario. It is one thing to go out of one's way to be nice to the unfortunate, as an act of charity; it is quite another to adopt a policy that penalizes success.

Conclusion:

We conclude with both a positive and a normative statement. Regarding the first, it is our conclusion that the "one paper at a time" rule, reduces quality of scholarly output. To the extent that scholarly output promotes human welfare, it, too, achieves a lower level than would otherwise be attainable. Regarding the second, the public policy recommendation emanating from this quarter is to avoid this affirmative action type editorial rule. As affirmative action reduces social and economic productivity below the level we are otherwise capable of reaching, the same holds true in the realm of scholarly research and publication.

Appendix: Open Letter to Editors who adopt the one article at a time to a 'customer' rule:

I'd like to ask you to reconsider your rule: a maximum of two submissions (or is it one? I'm not sure) to a customer (potential author) at any one time. As I see things, the mandate of your journal is the publish the *best* articles in the subject matter you cover. Period. That is, not the "*best* articles" with *any* side conditions, which would necessarily detract from that goal; but, rather, the plain old "*best* articles," period.

Suppose that Murray Rothbard and Ludwig von Mises were now alive and actively publishing. Stipulate, if you would, that if you followed the rule of publishing the *best* articles, period, with no side constraints whatsoever, that 75% of your pages would be filled with nothing but their publications, and 25% of its pages would feature the work of other people. If you were true to your present one to a customer practice, you would reject this scenario, and, instead, publish Murray and Ludwig only once or twice per year each. If so, you would not be publishing the *best* articles, possible.

Instead, you would be (and now *are*) employing a sort of affirmative action rule: allowing lesser material and people into your journal, and rejecting (we posit, arguendo) better publications written by these two super scholars. This sort of egalitarianism, it appears to me, is difficult to square with the philosophical outlook I think we both share. Please don't misunderstand me: I'm not comparing my work, as regards quality, with anyone else's; certainly not with these two world class scholars. I am merely trying to describe your present policy in the starkest and most accurate manner I can. But please don't think I am only criticizing your limitations on submissions only for my own sake. Believe me, I can get pretty much all of my writings published elsewhere. There are several editors who will pretty much publish anything I send them. In any case, I already have over 300 papers published in double blind refereed scholarly journals. No, it is the principle of the thing, I am concerned about.

I hope and trust you'll take this letter as an honest attempt to improve the operation of an already very excellent journal.

Yours truly,

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