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# Critiques of Gatekeeping In Scholarly Journals: An Analysis of Perceptions and Data

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**T**he last decade of the twentieth century has brought us a barrage of complaints about the nature and functioning of the editorial boards of communication journals. Leslie (1998) wrote a critique of the editorial processes which he believes exist in some of the academic journals in the discipline of communication. This is only one of a pattern of such critiques (Blair, Brown, & Baxter, 1994; Schwartz, 1997; Schwartzman, 1997; Erickson, Fleuriet, & Hosman, 1993; Erickson, Fleuriet, & Hosman, 1996). While not completely in agreement with one another, the critics offer their perceptions of the reality of decision-making in journal editorial boards. One pattern among these critiques is that they often divide the authors' world (in this case, the academic world of communication) into the "haves" and the "have-nots."

The haves are those who more often get their work published. The have-nots are those who try as they may, writing and rewriting, sending a paper to this communication journal and to that one, feel that they are making little progress. Critics often state that the result is a lower quality of published research. The inference is that if only those rejected articles were published and those accepted articles were rejected, then the discipline would be more respected among our colleagues in other disciplines. Whether this is the case is debatable. What we do know is that it has been relatively unimportant to undergo any investigation of facts based on empirical evidence in these critiques.

There are certain elements in the pattern among the critics of journal articles and the journal publishing process. First, they tend to distort what was written in the original article by changing the words, concepts, or ideas. Second, they redefine the parameters of the study they are critiquing. Third, there is sometimes an element of hypocrisy in the critics' attack.

In large measure, some critics (Leslie, 1998) make their first mistake in not reading the entire article or by changing the wording and meaning in what is stated. For example, the article (Hickson, Stacks, & Amsbary, 1993) does not state that these are the 25 most important, the best, the researchers with the highest quality articles, the most well known, the cutest, or anything but the most prolific. Erickson, et al. (1993) write that "prolific publishing garners prestige" is a fallacy in the work of Hickson, et al. (1993). Yet Hickson, et al. (1993) *never* wrote about prestige, just about prolific publishing. Prestige has been a construct conjured by the critics.

Another tact is to intensely critique the title and specific words by attacking the meaning of words in the title or words scattered throughout the paper, but out of context. This type of critique has been undertaken with the words, "yardstick" (Blair, et al., 1994) and "scholar" (Erickson, et al., 1993). Thus, the implication from the critics is that a yardstick is not for measuring. Why, then, didn't the authors just use "switch," "paddle," or "whip?" And the critics claim that being prolific is not scholarly. According to the critics, the most scholarly people might be those who publish a few "quality" articles. Carried to its dialectical extreme, perhaps the real scholars are those who publish nothing—their quality being so high that the discipline cannot condone them or the erstwhile haves would fear being disempowered.

Next, the critique typically expands the boundaries of what is discussed in the original article. "Well, other people publish more in other journals outside the discipline." But the article was about publications *inside* the discipline. Or other people publish more *books*. The original article was *not about books*. Or other people publish more *research in books*. The original article was *not about essays or studies published in books*. Or others are better teachers. The original article was not about teaching.

One of the basic principles of criticism that we learned (in philosophy courses) was that one should critique a study given its own parameters, at least as a starting point. Otherwise, we might critique Lincoln for not mentioning the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Domain generality is a characteristic of studies. Obviously, Leslie (1998) did not critique *all* social science studies; he picked out only four. He did not pick out *all* of the articles that have been published on gender differences. Virtually every study published in *Women's Studies in Communication* is about gender. But the problem, from any scientific stance, social or otherwise, is that Leslie (1998) *picked them out*. He set up the criteria from his own parameters and chose four — four — to single out. They are not even the only ones on gender differences *written by males*. A social scientist minimally uses a *method*. And a social scientist would use criteria that appear *reasonable* or preferably criteria selected by some other, more objective source than himself.

Often we find, too, in such critiques an element of hypocrisy. Erickson, et al. (1993) undertook a critique in which they assaulted the use of coauthored works, referring to them as "quick and dirty" studies. Yet one of the authors of Erickson, et al. (1993) had 18 articles published (as of 1995 according to the Matlon Index, from which the other study was drawn), of which 13 were coauthored. A second author has published 13, of which 10 were coauthored; and a third had published two, both of which were coauthored. This is a total of 33 (by three researchers) of which eight were individually authored. Had their own criteria been used in a tenure and promotion case, one would have five, another three, and the third, zero.

### SEARCHING FOR SOLUTIONS

In some cases, the critics offer suggestions for changing what they critique. In other cases, they do not. Leslie (1998) has offered suggestions. He states that "the root of the problem may lie in the peer review process (p. 111)." The Leslie (1998) solution for the

problem of so many social science studies being published at the expense of other [critical] scholars is that the editorial review process needs to be changed.

First, he suggests that editors need more flexibility so that they are not bound by their self-selected, [prejudiced] reviewers. We know of no case where an editor lacks such flexibility. We should consider that the editor selects the editorial board and chooses which reviewers to send which papers. Even if all the reviewers recommend against publication, the editor maintains the prerogative to publish the paper. Of course, some editors use individuals whom they refer to as "killer reviewers." These are individuals who reject virtually any paper. But most editors, too, have those reviewers who try to work with authors, offering suggestions for rewrites. Some writers refuse to rewrite and either send the paper elsewhere or place in it a filing cabinet for revision.

Second, Leslie (1998) has written that a survey of *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* reviewers indicated their preference for changes in the peer review process, such as "avoiding tired treatments of tired and narrow topics," "ask [ing] important and new research questions," "emphasiz[ing] quality" and generat[ing] and advanc[ing] theory" (Folkerts, 1996). These were supposedly comments by the reviewers and the survey was undertaken by an editor. Then, why have they not implemented their solutions? Certainly they have the freedom to do so. Second, Leslie (1998) is concerned that what is being published is traditional, *establishment*, institutional. Blair, et al. (1994) critique their reviewers for "*the occupancy of the mainstream*," which is, in essence *establishment*.

That's right. That's what these journals are — *establishment* journals. The editors are selected by a board of a particular academic organization. For the most part, the editors are chosen because they are experienced researchers. These, then, are the views of some of the critics. The authors of this paper decided to employ an empirical method to determine potential biases of reviewers through the analysis of data generated from the editorial boards. Several types of potential bias were queried to determine the potential for concern. The following research questions were posed:

RQ1: What is the mean, median, and mode number of journal boards that a particular individual serves?

This question is posed to determine if only a few people are making decisions for a large number of journals, therefore causing concern in that a paper could be rejected by the same person on several different occasions.

RQ2: What is the relationship among the top 25 editorial board members and the number of articles they have published in establishment journals?

The purpose of this question is to determine whether only those who have published a substantial number of articles in the same journals are making the decisions. Should there appear to be too much overlap, the concern would be that new ideas might have difficulty in appearing.

RQ3: What is the number of individuals serving on each editorial board who have no articles published in any of these journals?

The purpose of this question is to determine whether there is an undue number of editorial board members with no experience in publishing in these "establishment" journals. However, if there appear some who have not published in these journals [but perhaps elsewhere] it might provide balance.

RQ4: What is the regional and institutional composition of these journal editorial boards?

This question is asked to see whether certain institutions or parts of the country appear to have more influence on the decision-making process than do others.

### METHOD

Editorial boards of all of the journals listed in the Matlon index (Matlon & Ortiz, 1997) were utilized including: *Argumentation and Advocacy*, *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, *Southern Communication Journal*, *Communication Quarterly*, *Western Journal of Communication*, *Journal of Communication*, *Human Communication Research*, *Howard Journal of Communications*, *Communication Monographs*, *Communication Education*, *Communication Reports*, *Communication Research*, *Communication Research Reports*, *Communication Studies*, *Communication Theory*, *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, the *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, *Journal of the ACA*, *Journal of Communication and Religion*, *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, *Women's Studies in Communication*, and *Text and Performance Quarterly* were studied. While this index is not complete, it is the most complete single index devoted to communication studies. Those individuals studied were all members of the regular editorial board and the editor, as indicated in the front of each journal, or wherever it was located in a particular journal. We looked at the names on the editorial boards as of Spring, 1997, which was chosen as a random issue. The remainder of the procedure was *to count*.

### RESULTS

The total number of different individuals listed as a member of at least one of these editorial boards was 855. There were a total of 1,269 editorial board "positions." Table 1 indicates how many boards individuals served on in the Spring of 1997. The mean number of board members per journal was 35.6; the range was 14-76, with the *Journal of Communication and Religion* having the fewest in number and the *Journal of Communication* the most.

**TABLE 1**  
**Number of Faculty Serving on Multiple Boards**

Number of Editorial Boards	Number of Faculty
7 boards	1
6 boards	3
5 boards	11
4 boards	23
3 boards	70
2 boards	140
1 board	607
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>855</b>

The answer to the first research question, then, is that the median number of boards on which individuals serve is 1.60. The mean is 1.47, and the mode is 1.00.

To study the question (RQ2) of the relationship between editorial board membership and publications in establishment journals, the names were compared with figures taken from the Matlon and Ortiz (1997) index and reported by Hickson, Stacks, & Bodon (1999). Thirty-eight (38) names are found in the top "25" because of ties. The results are reported in Table 2.

**TABLE 2**  
**Most Prolific Editorial Board Members**

Name	Institution	Editorial Boards	Articles	Article Ranking
1. Kearney, P.	CSU-Long Beach	7	20	80
2. Dillard, J.	Wisconsin	6	23	51
2. Foss, K.	New Mexico	6	22	59
2. Ray, E.	Cleveland State	6	6	n.r.
5. Berger, C.	UC-Davis	5	22	59
5. Blair, C.	UC-Davis	5	8	n.r.
5. Bryant, J.	Alabama	5	17	n.r.
5. Cappella, J.	Pennsylvania	5	13	n.r.
5. Courtright, J.	Delaware	5	11	n.r.
5. Gudykunst, W.	CSU-Fullerton	5	29	23
5. Hauser, G.	Penn State	5	12	n.r.
5. Plax, T.	CSU-Long Beach	5	31	21
5. Roloff, M.	Northwestern	5	20	80
5. Rubin, A.	Kent State	5	33	16
5. Wilson, S.	N. Illinois	5	10	n.r.
16. Andersen, J.	San Diego St.	4	13	n.r.
16. Ayres, J.	Washington St.	4	44	8
16. Booth-Butterfield, M.	West Virginia	4	21	69
16. Burgoon, J.	Arizona	4	57	3
16. Burgoon, M.	Arizona	4	45	7
16. Canary, D.	Penn State	4	13	n.r.
16. Cheney, G.	Montana	4	13	n.r.
16. Chesebro, J.	Indiana St	4	29	23
16. Craig, R.	Colorado	4	10	n.r.
16. Dow, B.	Georgia	4	8	n.r.
16. Farrell, T.	Northwestern	4	19	91
16. Fitzpatrick, M.	Wisconsin	4	22	59
16. Frey, L.	Loyola-Chicago	4	5	n.r.
16. Gouran, D.	Penn State	4	21	69
16. Hyde, M.	Wake Forest	4	9	n.r.
16. Kaid, L.	Oklahoma	4	16	n.r.
16. Metts, S.	Illinois St	4	6	n.r.
16. Nussbaum, J.	Oklahoma	4	15	n.r.
16. Poole, M.	Texas A & M	4	14	n.r.
16. Putnam, L.	Texas A & M	4	17	n.r.
16. Rubin, R.	Kent St	4	33	16
16. Sparks, G.	Purdue	4	22	59
16. Wilson, B.	UC-Santa Barbara	4	14	n.r.

These 38 people account for 172 editorial slots (14%). The top 108 editorial board members account for 30.1% of the slots. Thus, approximately 100 people (assuming duties are equally divided) evaluate about one-third of the manuscripts. Considering that most journals use at least three reviewers, the chances of one of the reviewers being one of these people is high. Of the 38, however, only 18 (47.3%) appear on the list of most prolific researchers.

The third research question (RQ3) asked how many editorial board members had no articles published in the establishment journals. Using Matlon and Ortiz (1997), the number of articles was checked for each journal editorial board member. Table 3 illustrates the number of members with zero articles in the index as well as the mean number for the journal.

Interestingly, we found that some of the establishment journals have substantial numbers of members who have not published in *establishment* journals (HCR= 11; CE= 8; CQ= 8); some more specialized and demographic specific journals, too, have some board members who have not published in establishment journals (WSC= 12; JACA= 10; A&A = 9). There were no zeros on the editorial board of *Communication Reports*, the only journal with none. The top four in average were establishment journals. The bottom seven were specialized by demographics and/or subject matter.

TABLE 3

## Journal Editorial Board Members: Number with Zero Articles and Means

Journal	No. Members with Zero	Total Members	Mean
Communication Monographs	2	53	17.8
Communication Education	8	62	14.7
Communication Research	1	34	14.2
Journal of Communication	2	77	14.1
Communication Research Reports	7	54	12.9
Journal of Applied Communication Research	2	54	12.6
Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly	3	58	11.9
Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media	2	72	11.2
All Editors	2	24	10.7*
Communication Quarterly	8	71	10.6
Human Communication Research	11	45	10.5
Southern Communication Journal	2	50	10.2
Communication Reports	0	21	9.9
Quarterly Journal of Speech	2	40	9.4
Communication Theory	4	45	9.3
Communication Studies	2	42	9.0
Journal of the Association for Communication Administration	10	47	9.0
Argumentation and Advocacy	9	40	8.3
Western Journal of Communication	6	49	6.8
Women's Studies in Communication	12	68	5.9
Text and Performance Quarterly	7	44	5.6
Philosophy and Rhetoric	3	27	5.4
Critical Studies in Mass Communication	9	44	4.8
Journal of Communication and Religion	4	14	3.9
Howard Journal of Communication	5	44	3.9

\*The figure provides the mean number for the editors of each of the 24 journals. The means for editorial boards do not include the editors or associate editors.

Research question 4 asked about the geographic and institutional composition of editorial board members. Those numbers are shown in Table 4.

**TABLE 4**  
**Institutional Representation on Editorial Boards**

Institution	Number of Individuals on Boards	Total Number of Positions Filled	Publication Ranking*
Wisconsin-Madison	22	37	6
Northwestern	14	30	16
Penn St.	13	28	n.r.
Purdue	11	26	6
Utah	10	25	n.r.
Georgia	15	23	4
North Carolina	15	23	15
CSU-Long Beach	10	22	8
Indiana	13	22	10
UC-Santa Barbara	12	22	10
Michigan St.	13	20	9
Arizona St.	12	18	n.r.
Illinois	14	18	24
Texas	12	18	3
West Virginia U.	8	18	1
UC-Davis	7	17	10
Iowa	13	17	13
New Mexico	8	17	24
CSU-San Diego	7	16	n.r.
Oklahoma	6	16	n.r.
Arizona	7	15	5
Cleveland St.	9	15	n.r.
Kansas	11	14	n.r.
Minnesota	10	14	17
Ohio U.	9	14	n.r.
Pennsylvania	7	14	n.r.
Texas A&M	6	14	n.r.

Although none of the critics have attacked institutional bias in any of their works, it appears that this may be an area where some bias may be present. The 27 institutions that hold the most positions on editorial boards account for a total of 294 of the 855 people who serve on such boards (34%); in addition, these 27 institutions account for 533 of the 1,269 editorial positions (42%). Before one yells, "Foul!," however, it should be noted that in many of these cases the individuals are not even in the same department or school at their own institutions.

Of those institutions reported by Hickson, et al. (1999) as being most productive in research, ten are not listed on the editorial board list. They include: Kent State, Denver, Stanford, Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Southern California, Alabama at Birmingham, Colorado, Ohio State, Washington, and Kentucky. The institutions with large numbers on editorial



boards but not ranked in research productivity include: Pennsylvania State, Utah, Arizona State, California State-San Diego, Oklahoma, Cleveland State, Kansas, Ohio University, Pennsylvania, and Texas A&M. It should be noted, however, that the time frames are different for the two studies.

### ANALYSIS

By analyzing these data we may be able to determine whether there are too few total people on such editorial boards. As well we can determine whether the boards may be biased because they have undertaken so much research that they feel an article which differs from what they may think could be rejected. Whether these are "good" or "bad" things, of course, depends on one's perspective. Having more experienced researchers on the boards assures their competence regarding methodology, but it may be a negative factor concerning openness to other methodologies. If the same people serve on a number of boards, then they would certainly be more experienced, but they also might see the same article on more than one occasion.

Some individuals were on several editorial boards. Assuming that these individuals are experts in a specialty, it is likely that the same people would see a paper more than once. Certainly a reviewer should reject the same paper for only one journal. This is not a major issue, however, in that there are 855 different people who serve on these editorial boards. To cover certain topics, it is sometimes necessary for editors to choose the same individuals.

Experience in publishing in these same journals by members of editorial boards varies considerably. Some members and even editors have little experience in publishing in these "establishment journals." They may have been published a great deal, however, in other areas. It is quite possible, for example, that an individual is known for a certain quantitative expertise, who publishes primarily in psychology. Or an expert on critical methods may publish in language or history journals.

We found that a few had never published in these journals. Most had. The journals with the smallest means were more specialized journals in terms of subject matter (*Text and Performance Quarterly*, for example) or demographics (*Women's Studies in Communication*). The mean number of articles published in establishment journals for the editors was 10.7, which places them in the top 3.9% of all time. We did find considerable "overlap" in the editorial boards of the ICA journals. However, the relatively large number of zeros in these journals can be accounted for by virtue of more board members coming from outside the United States.

We also found that some editors chose several individuals from their own department to be on the editorial boards. This is probably because of convenience, especially in instances where a reviewer is late in returning a review. We found that the percentage of females on the editorial boards was about 50% (*Western Journal of Communication*; *Human Communication Research*; *Communication Monographs*). If we look at journals chosen by Leslie, however, we see that the *Journal of Communication* had almost two-thirds males on its editorial board, *Communication Theory* had more than four times as many males on the board as females, and *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* had more than two-thirds males on its editorial board. Thus, Leslie appears correct about the number of females on editorial boards in his selected journals, but not in general. Most editors appear to attempt to achieve some gender balance.

The reality is that editors sometimes choose members who are highly active and dependable within an organization despite having not published in that journal or similar ones. In addition, editors exchange names of people who are dependable — they return comments within a certain time frame. From the analysis it would appear that editors

attempt to maintain balance considering experience in publishing, geographic and institutional affiliation, and gender.

The difference appears that mostly quantitative researchers are on editorial boards which publish that kind of research and mostly critical researchers are on editorial boards which publish that kind of research. Much of the concern of some of the critics is that quantitative researchers are analyzing critical research.

Like athletes, there is a tendency to blame the umpire or referee for making a "bad call." Others sometimes blame their coaches (doctoral professors). There are several choices currently available to such people. First, just stop trying. This is probably an unsatisfactory solution. Despite the "fact" that some critics say the number of articles is unimportant, we all know in our heart of hearts that they are. While a person could be granted tenure at many institutions with one or two articles 25 years ago, this does not happen at most places today.

Second, a rejected writer can go outside the field. This appears to work for some. And there is little doubt that many communication researchers lean more toward the kinds of research that is undertaken in history or psychology or political science or theatre or linguistics. Sometimes people are not housed where they do their research. However, it is critical that a researcher/writer *analyze the journal and the editorial board before submitting an article*. This kind of audience analysis is what we teach all of the time. The expectation that one is likely to get a critical essay accepted in a primarily quantitative journal is simply bad audience analysis — or no audience analysis.

Third, the writer can adapt to the criticisms of the reviewers. This may be the horror of all horrors. But re-writes are no more unusual in journals than they are in graduate programs. A fourth option is to initiate your own journal. It has been done. *Communication Research Reports* and the *Journal of Applied Communication Research* were begun because a very few people thought there was a need for them.

It might be a good idea for editors to state in their policy statements more precisely how they will make final decisions on acceptance as well as what kinds of articles they will and will not accept. Perhaps there should be a journal devoted to publishing *only* the research of graduate students, with an editorial board of professors and doctoral students. It might be a good idea for editors to limit the number of reviewers they have on their boards from their own institutions. Finally, gender and geographical balance should continue to be factors in selecting editorial boards.

Although this study provides some basic data for one year of the journals, additional research may be needed. Any individual's line of inquiry toward this end may be different. For example, a researcher might wish to survey the qualifications of editorial board members with zero "mainstream" articles. Another may wish to survey editors or former editors to determine how they choose editorial boards and how they choose individual reviewers for a particular paper. Still another may survey writers to determine how many different journals look at a particular paper before it is published. Studies on the re-writing process as well as the responsibilities of readers also might prove useful. What does not appear useful is a continual barrage of "I don't like the editorial process because . . ." [my personal opinion.]

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