Humanities Journals Confront Identity Crisis

By JENNIFER HOWARD

Senior scholars, the A-list of academic publishing, seem to submit fewer unsolicited manuscripts to traditional humanities journals than they used to. "The journal has become, with very few exceptions, the place where junior and midlevel scholars are placing their work," according to Bonnie Wheeler, president of the Council of Editors of Learned Journals.

Her evidence is anecdotal, but the decline is only part of what Ms. Wheeler described as a powerful combination of challenges to the identity of such journals.

At the Conference of Historical Journals at the American Historical Association's annual meeting in January, Ms. Wheeler, an associate professor of English at Southern Methodist University and editor of the journal Arthuriana, sounded the alarm. She said journals are caught between the changing habits of readers, who increasingly just want individual pieces of content, and growing pressure to consider their standing in new rankings like the European Reference Index for the Humanities, which critics charge may create a caste system of journals (The Chronicle, October 10, 2008).

Technology and changing habits have called into question the nature of the traditional humanities journal — a printed assembly of peer-reviewed articles, reviews, and notes and queries offered by subscription. "What we shared until recently was a sense that the academic journal appeared between covers as a deliberately constructed series of articles, sometimes on a common theme," Ms. Wheeler observed.

A journal started today, however, is likely to be online-only and open access. And more and more readers now discover bits and pieces of any journal's content — an article here, a book review there — through electronic databases and aggregators like JSTOR, Project Muse, and Ebsco.

Editors of well-established humanities journals have mixed feelings about the changes. They are not Luddites. They appreciate how digital access has expanded the audience for much of the work they publish. They see the possibilities that the Web presents for publishing and scholarship. Editors have also learned that the databases that deliver content to more readers can be a robust source of operating revenue because they work on a subscription model — which helps explain why many editors (or their publishers) have not yet embraced open access.

More readers, more dollars: That makes editors happy. But they worry about how to carry the idea of a journal as an organized whole over into the digital world. "The journal itself becomes invisible to the end-user," Ms. Wheeler told her audience. Even as access to its content increases, "the identity of the journal is often lost."

On its Web site, the Council of Editors of Learned Journals has set up a blog devoted to how scholarly journals can adapt to a Web 2.0 future. Run by Jo Guldi, a Mellon postdoctoral fellow in digital history at the University of Chicago, the site has begun laying out "tentative principles for rethinking journals by way of sparking conversation." It remains to be seen how ready editors are to have that conversation.

Submitive Behavior

Part of that debate will likely focus on the perceived drop in submissions from marquee names. Several journal editors said they had observed this trend, and had different theories about it. Maybe it's a natural winnowing, as disciplines evolve and careers move forward. Humanities fields like history and literary studies have become more specialized over the past couple of decades, making more-general journals like PMLA, the journal of the Modern Language Association, perhaps less tempting as venues. Journals go in and out of fashion. Eminent scholars get busier.

Marshall Brown, editor of Modern Language Quarterly: A Journal of Literary History and a professor of comparative literature at the University of Washington, said he relies on special issues and networking to keep a good number of senior scholars in the contributor mix. That is a particular challenge for a journal like his, which lacks a focus on one author or period that would make it the obvious place for certain A-listers to publish. "We compensate because we do some of the commissioning," he said. "We publish a higher percentage of senior scholars than show up in our submissions."

Even author-specific journals may have to think creatively to keep a good mix of scholar-contributors. Most of the articles that appear in Leviathan: A Journal of Melville Studies come from early to midcareer scholars, according to its editor, John L. Bryant. (He is also a professor of English at Hofstra University.) Senior scholars tend to submit notes about biographical or source discoveries, he said, or to contribute to special issues, many inspired by conference panels. Now in its 11th year, Leviathan is a
relatively new journal, and it looks kindly on work by scholars not primarily known as Melvilleans, Mr. Bryant said, which may partly explain its contributor balance.

Are leading lights now less willing to put themselves through the blind peer-review process? Not necessarily, but they may feel less need to resort to over-the-transom essays when they have more assured outlets for their work. They have less need to rack up credentials to impress tenure-and-promotion committees or to make a name in their fields. They may also be called on to spend more time editing and peer-reviewing for journals.

Jeffrey J. Williams, the longtime editor of the minnesota review and a professor of English at Carnegie Mellon University, calls it "the speedup of the profession." In an e-mail message to The Chronicle, he wrote that "most senior people write on demand and have a docket of things they have to do."

"My own sense is that I rarely have something to send out," Mr. Williams said. "Almost all the pieces I'm doing are committed somewhere, because I was asked to contribute."

The vogue for edited collections may also be distracting scholars. In 2005, James Eli Adams, an associate professor of English at Cornell University, published an article in the Journal of Victorian Culture called "The Function of Journals at the Present Time," in which he argued that the "explosion" of edited collections has tended "to siphon off a great deal of article-length work from senior scholars."

Craig Howes, a professor of English at the University of Hawaii-Manoa and director of the Center for Biographical Research there, agrees. Mr. Howes co-edits Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly. Every fall, the journal publishes a bibliography of work published in the field, along with an editor's note that sketches out publishing trends.

The fall 2006 note remarks on "the continued shift to edited collections as the principal venue for lifewriting criticism and theory." The editors identified 321 articles as having been published in regular journal issues, a small increase from the previous year's number (298). They found 544 essays in edited collections, an increase of more than a hundred from a year before. The fall 2007 and 2008 editors' notes round up more evidence of the trend.

"The tip, in terms of moving toward edited collections, is really quite strong," Mr. Howes said in an interview. "By putting together four articles, you get a book, and a book is valued more."

The catch is that, thanks to digital availability, journal articles have far more readers. Publish in book form "and you're usually condemning yourself to having an audience of about 5 percent of what you'd have" if you published the same material in article form, Mr. Howes said.

**From Reader to User**

When it comes to attracting readers, individual authors have cause to celebrate the rise of digital databases. You do not need to be a Melville expert, steeped in the scholarly apparatus of 19th-century American literature, to stumble across an article in Leviathan. All you need is a search engine and a topic.

But a reader who finds material that way may never see past individual articles to the journal itself or, beyond that, to the field it helps describe. Some databases do create a virtual presence or portal for an entire journal, not just access to its parts, but editors still worry about how to preserve a sense of the whole.

"Like any editor, I also select essays for an issue that resonate with each other or offer alternative perspectives or touch on a range of texts, or only one text," Mr. Bryant, Leviathan's editor, said. He also puts effort into the layout and design of each issue. "All of those decisions affect the reading experience in a way that does not carry over to online searches."

Robert A. Schneider, a professor of history at Indiana University at Bloomington and editor of the American Historical Review, sees a paradox in scholarly-journal publishing now. "The use and reading of journal articles is going way, way up, both for scholars and students," Mr. Schneider said. The danger is that journal content turns into just a collection of links rather than a useful indicator of "how the profession organizes its knowledge."

Mr. Schneider believes that journals like his continue to be "laboratories for scholarship in the most fundamental way." At the same time, now that more articles find their way into more hands, he wonders whether a different style of authorship is called for. Scholars ought to consider "producing articles that are more synthetic, that are more interpretive, that can be assigned to students," he said. "We wouldn't want to push out real scholarship, scholarship that's adding to our knowledge in a fundamental way, but it suggests a new possibility."

One of Mr. Schneider's colleagues in Indiana's history department, Edward T. Linenthal, edits another prominent publication, The Journal of American History. Under his editorship, the journal has jumped on the possibilities of Web 2.0, experimenting with a number of Web-driven features, including a special Hurricane Katrina issue whose Web component offered an abundance of multimedia resources and intertextual notes.

"If in fact there is a new kind of historical expression that is digital history, we want to be a place where it can be presented," Mr. Linenthal said. Still, "it's hard for me to imagine The Journal of American History becoming entirely digital anytime in the near future." The journal still prints 9,000 to 10,000 paper copies of every issue. (A subscription is part of membership in the Organization of American Historians.)
Mr. Linenthal says he gets a "very strong sense from people who read the journal" that they continue to value the whole package — the sequence of articles, book reviews, exhibition reviews, etc.

He has company in believing that it is too soon to abandon the old print-based ways, even as he and his fellow editors make room for the new and digital. Ivan Kreilkamp, an associate professor of English at Indiana University at Bloomington and co-editor of Victorian Studies, appreciates the scholarly possibilities of Web 2.0. But he argues that the traditional humanities journal produces "dense, deeply researched, and extensively edited works of scholarship that have a depth and thoroughness that can't generally be found in the realm of blogs and listservs."

"You could think of our kind of scholarship," he said, "as something like 'slow food' in a fast-food culture."

http://chronicle.com
Section: The Faculty
Volume 55, Issue 29, Page A1
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