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# EDITOR'S FOREWORD

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## MANUSCRIPT REVIEW TIME AND JOURNAL ACCEPTANCE RATES

This is the second issue of *LARR* to appear under the masthead of the University of Texas at Austin. The editors are pleased to have received such a favorable response to the new cover design adopted in volume 38 onwards, along with positive comments about, and support for, the changes that we are putting into effect in the short and medium term. These changes, together with a new Web site that heralded the new design, may be viewed at <http://larr.lanl.utexas.edu/>. The Web site provides full details about such items as editorial policies, the submission of manuscripts, how to access *LARR-On-Line*, and subscription information.

The objective of this brief foreword is two-fold: first, to describe our efforts to substantially speed up the review process and to expedite publication of research in *LARR*; and second, to offer feedback about the Editors' first year's experience regarding the pattern of submissions and the acceptance rates for manuscripts. In reporting on these two areas, we hope to encourage more submissions in the future.

### MANUSCRIPT REVIEW AND PUBLICATION TIME

Of major concern to all scholars is the time it takes to receive a decision on a manuscript and the time period between submission of the definitive version of an accepted article and its publication. Horror stories abound, and while no one expects the rapid publication turnaround that is often associated with scientific and medical journals, most of us have suffered at one time or another from excessive delays—sometimes interminably so—with journals in which we have sought to place our research. It often seems that some journals have become overly complacent about the speed with which they review and process articles, and

come close to abusing the time-honored requirements that authors not simultaneously submit their work to more than one journal and not to have published it elsewhere. These two requirements are central to a journal's successful functioning, but in demanding exclusive access to a manuscript for a period of time (which is in effect what editors do), it is incumbent upon us, as editors, to ensure that the process be expeditious and fair; also, that we provide helpful feedback to the scholars whose work we are evaluating for publication.

The editors of *LARR* at UT-Austin are fully committed to taking responsibility and ensuring that the journal continue to publish top-quality scholarship, and that we do so more rapidly than in the past. At *LARR*, the aim is to avoid having a significant backlog or queue of papers that further delays publication of an accepted manuscript. The in-press time thereafter is straightforward, providing few opportunities for time savings: once a manuscript is accepted, production (copyediting, communicating with authors over edits, proofs, and printing) requires a minimum of nine months. Not offering authors the opportunity to check their copyedited manuscripts would be, in the view of the Editors, a retrograde step and one that we are unwilling to take in order to achieve what would only be a modest reduction of around eight to ten weeks.

Since taking over the reins in 2002, we have made it *LARR*'s policy to notify authors of a final decision within three to four months of manuscript receipt, and to expedite the review process such that it is often much faster. In order to achieve this, papers undergo an initial internal review by an expert in the field, and where it is decided not to proceed with an external review of the manuscript, the paper is then rejected at that stage. Although painful, the process is at least swift: authors can expect to hear within one month that their paper has not been accepted and that they can seek to place it elsewhere. Only 40 percent of submissions get to the second stage of a full external review by three referees. It is arguable that in the past *LARR* has been guilty of over-reviewing, sometimes soliciting as many as four or five external reviews, prolonging the process significantly. We have thus reduced the number of reviewers to three in order to further expedite the evaluation process. These reviews are "double blind" (neither reviewers nor authors know each other's identity), and external reviewers are asked to return their evaluations within four weeks of receipt. We do not make a decision until we have three reports in hand, "blind" copies of which are sent to the author. Unlike most other journals, *LARR* also sends reviewers copies of all the evaluations, as well as the decision letter—with all identifying remarks removed, of course. The aim is to maximize feedback to authors and reviewers alike.

In the case of manuscripts that have been revised and resubmitted, the process is normally even faster, since the two reviewers (one original and

one newly selected) are asked primarily to assess whether the author has satisfactorily addressed the original reviewers' comments (of which they also receive copies). This process usually takes between four and six weeks. Thus, *LARR* is doing its utmost to create a review process that is timely and efficient, so that no one falls between the cracks and experiences a long delay. As we move towards increasing the electronic processing of manuscripts, we anticipate being able to further reduce the turnaround time, but inevitably the review and production process will on average take around twelve months between initial submission and actual publication for outright or conditional acceptances, and longer, certainly, where the manuscript requires major revisions. Therefore it is imperative to cut the front-end receipt and review time to a sensible (and achievable) minimum. That is our goal, and it is one we have met so far—at least for those manuscripts that have been entirely under our control since January 2002.

Book review essays are edited internally and do not go out for external review. Once received, these can usually be published within the nine-month window outlined above, assuming that major revisions are not required. However, here some “queuing” of manuscripts may occur, depending upon the phasing of submission of review essays, a factor which tends to be less predictable.

#### THE PATTERN OF MANUSCRIPT SUBMISSIONS AND ACCEPTANCE RATES, 2001–02

Since John Martz's editorship of *LARR* (1975–79), it has been the practice for the lead editor to report to readers on the patterns of submissions—one that Gil Merx continued at the University of New Mexico (UNM), and which I propose to continue. However, the change of editorship and the place of publication after twenty years has led to some variation in the start and end months of reporting periods, as well as increased the desirability of revising some of the categories used to classify disciplinary content of submissions: thus, the data are not always directly comparable. Moreover, while responsibility for *LARR* did not move to the University of Texas until January 2002, in effect we began to receive manuscripts and books for review starting in August of the previous year. This meant that a modest number of new full articles were passed on to us from UNM. We also subsequently received a small number of resubmissions that were originally peer-reviewed under our predecessors. Authors whose manuscripts received an “R&R” (revise and resubmit) from the University of New Mexico in the relatively recent past should not be deterred from resubmitting to us at Texas, where they will undergo the normal second-review process. In order to avoid confusion and possible double-counting, however, the following data relate only to new manuscripts received by UNM in late summer and

re-routed to us, and to those received for the twelve-month period from 1 September 2001 to 31 August 2002.

Unlike previous reports on *LARR* submission data, the present one excludes book review essays for two reasons. First, they are actively solicited and are somewhat unpredictable in the "rendition" rates generated, reflecting, perhaps, the assiduousness of the responsible editor. Second, they are not normally externally peer-reviewed. Only manuscripts submitted as full articles or as Research Notes which undergo intensive peer review are considered here, since these comprise the lifeblood of the journal.

In terms of the patterns of submissions by country focus and disciplinary areas, the pattern remains much as before: Brazil (15 percent) and Mexico (13 percent) are the principal foci for research presentations, followed by Argentina (9 percent), which was rather more in the headlines in 2001 than it probably would have wished. Twenty-four percent were Latin American or multiple-country studies. Disciplinary areas most represented between 2001 and 2002 were the traditional stalwarts: history and political science (each with 19 percent), political economy (15 percent), while a cultural-studies grouping (comprising literature, language, art, etc.) made up 17 percent of submissions. Sociology, anthropology, geography and environmental studies, international relations, law, and so on, each represented less than 5 percent.

Excluding review essays, the total number of manuscript submissions appears to be slightly lower than in previous years (seventy-five manuscripts) down from the mid-eighties in the previous two years. This decline probably falls within the bounds of year-to-year variation and does not alarm us overly, although it appears to be a continuation of a downward trend from the mid-1990s when it reached an all-time high of 118 (as reported by Merx in *LARR* 30, no. 3:5). We hope to arrest this decline and to raise the number of submissions in the future, not least since we are seeking to publish more research articles in each issue, and in our "Instructions to Authors" have requested a reduction from fifty to thirty-five pages in the normal maximum length of submitted manuscripts.

One can never be entirely sure why a decline such as this has occurred. It may reflect a perception that *LARR* is overly oriented towards certain disciplines or areas of knowledge production, and that submissions from outside are unlikely to be successful. *LARR* is firmly wedded to maintaining its broad multidisciplinary base, and will continue to privilege research that is interdisciplinary in nature. A decline in submissions may also reflect concern that the review process of a particular journal is overly drawn out, taking too long to reach publication stage—a point that I have already addressed above. This decline might also derive from a sense that *LARR* favors top-flight research in established

arenas and from certain paradigmatic viewpoints, and is therefore less suited as a venue for breaking new ideas and new research—a perception, to the extent that it is held, we are doing our best to revise (see “Editorial Policy” on the Web site home page). Finally, it could reflect a view that *LARR* is especially tough, with low acceptance rates. In an environment where promotions and appointments are increasingly tied to academic productivity in ranked journals, the low prospects of acceptance, combined with a review process that may not have been sufficiently expeditious, could have actively dissuaded scholars from directing their work towards a high-prestige journal such as *LARR*.

Are *LARR* acceptance rates, then, low and out-of-line with other journals? It depends, of course, on the comparator selected. Publishing in *LARR* is not as tough as in some of the top disciplinary journals where acceptance rates of 10 percent or less are the norm, but it is probably considerably more difficult than in most area studies or interdisciplinary journals. In the period under review here (2001–02) *LARR* had an overall rejection rate of 80 percent—about the same or a tad higher than in previous years. Of the seventy-five manuscripts received, almost 60 percent were read and reviewed internally but did not go out for external peer review, and for a variety of reasons were deemed unsuitable for further consideration in *LARR*. This approximates the rate of first-cut rejections that were applied at the University of New Mexico, and should not be read as UT-Austin editors being tougher; although we are seeking to be much quicker in making the initial decision. Of those that did go out for external review which were subsequently rejected, 33 percent were straight rejections; 55 percent were rejections with encouragement to revise and resubmit; and 11 percent were rejections of manuscripts that had already gone through the R&R process, but were still not considered to be of sufficient merit. Although it is still too soon to judge accurately, my sense (and expectation) is that where authors do revise and resubmit their manuscripts and take account of the careful reading and comments offered by evaluators, there is a good chance that they will ultimately be successful in having their manuscripts accepted for publication in *LARR*. Though as the aforementioned data show, it is not axiomatic that an R&R will be accepted. In future years I hope to be able to present hard data on both the acceptance rate for R&Rs as well as the proportion of rejections that subsequently lead to resubmissions.

While *LARR* is committed to publishing top-quality research, it depends upon the goodwill of its manuscript reviewers to provide evaluations in a timely manner. We also rely heavily upon that research community to be willing to submit their work for scrutiny and testing; few scholars worth their salt should have a problem with that. The primary tasks of the editors, therefore, are first, to ensure that the high

standards of knowledge production achieved by *LARR* in the past be maintained; and second, to ensure that the process of manuscript review and production is expeditious and helpful to scholars worldwide, and supportive of knowledge production relating to our region of study. To the extent that we have a *lema*, that is it.

Peter M. Ward,  
Executive Editor