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IIMB Management Review



## BOOK REVIEW

Timothy Clark, Mike Wright & David J. Ketchen, Jr. (Eds), *How to Get Published in the Best Management Journals*, Edward Elgar Publishing, 2016, 320 pp, INR 7656.25.

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As a management scholar working in India and having gradually developed a desire, if not passion, for conducting research relevant to the country and its context, I was always concerned about the pressures on researchers in India to publish in the “so-called” top journals of management, mostly in the US. It was quite apparent to me that the agenda of the journals are driven by the needs of their home context and moulded by the research interests of top scholars from prominent business schools in the US who take on the “gate-keeping” roles in these journals. However, even as I was concerned from an Indian perspective, I believed that the review and publication processes at the top journals supported the pursuit of knowledge and the field of management was “richer” as a result. After reading the contributions in this book, I am less confident that the “top” journals are truly contributing to knowledge creation and dissemination, and convinced that it makes little sense to pressurise or even encourage researchers in India to publish in them.

The book consists of 32 chapters, some written by very well-known scholars in the field such as William H. Starbuck, Dennis Gioia, Michael A. Hitt, and Charles C. Snow, among others, and many by those who are still in the process of establishing their reputations. The quality of the chapters is quite uneven and this is not necessarily related to the reputation of the author. Some of the well written chapters are by less reputed scholars and may benefit someone seeking “tips” to publish in top journals in management. Most of the chapters, some of them even by authors of high repute, appear to be “quick and dirty” opinion pieces based on top of the mind recall without any significant effort to improve rigour. These are unlikely to provide significant insights to a young scholar to improve his/her chances of publishing in a top journal.

As indicated above, my reading of the chapters left me a little dejected about the field of management and about the ability of the publication processes of top management journals to contribute to knowledge in the field. Many of the papers

may have genuinely tried to provide information and suggestions that might help a young scholar publish in a top tier journal. Some of them have relied on their experience on editorial boards of journals to inform prospective authors on how to prepare acceptable manuscripts, while others have relied on their experience as authors to educate others on how to deal with reviewers’ comments, and the emotional ups and downs during the long journey to publication. However, in my review, I pay more attention to the factors that nudged me to arrive at a pessimistic assessment of the publication processes at these journals.

The first chapter of the book, written by the editors of the book, suggests that the whole enterprise of publishing in top journals is rather flawed. First, unlike in the past when a department, a business school or country-based associations generated a list of top journals based on scholarly assessments and local aspirations, the “top” journal list today is influenced by the list used by the agencies that rank business schools. Since the rankings are deemed important, researchers are encouraged by academic administrators to publish in the journals on the list, which not only establishes them as top journals but indirectly allows ranking agencies to decide which journal becomes a top journal. Since most of the international rankings are done by agencies outside India, it is likely that several journals of interest to Indian scholars will not be on the top list. Should scholars from India attempt to publish their work in the top management journals or should they choose areas of interest for research as defined by them? Or should they pursue the research they are passionate about and submit their papers to journals that have an agenda that accepts that kind of research? I believe that the second option will lead to more meaningful and proper reviews and, if published, the paper will be accessed by a more suitable readership.

Secondly, the pressure to publish in the top journals is leading to an “overload” of submissions at these journals leading to high levels of rejections, particularly desk-rejection, based on a “quick” read by the editor. A paper that deviates from the norm of a journal or is on a topic that the editor is not familiar with, is less likely to get a peep into the review process. This makes it highly unlikely that a paper focussed on a theoretical framework and a research problem unique to India will get a fair chance at one of these journals. Does a desk-reject mean that the paper is bad or is it that the editor is not quite qualified to appreciate the contribution of an unfamiliar paper? While acknowledging that there is much to be desired in the quality of papers produced in

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India, I am inclined to believe that many are rejected because editors are trying to cope with a large number of submissions.

Thirdly, compounding the problem, the "overload" of submissions is likely to result in a reviewer not being an "expert" on the topic that he/she is reviewing in a paper. Editors are being pushed into a situation where they are getting papers reviewed by people who are willing to review, rather than the experts who are overloaded. In that sense, the expectation that an article in a top journal has been reviewed by "experts" in the field is questionable. As a consequence, it is difficult to conclude that an accepted paper is truly good or that an unaccepted paper was of poor quality. It is highly likely that a poor review is a reflection of the "ignorance" of the reviewer rather than a genuine reflection of the quality of the paper. For authors writing from and about an alien context in India, the challenge of making it through such a flawed review process is even more daunting.

The editors even describe a study that examined the "rigour" of the review process by "resubmitting" 12 already published papers to the journals in which they had been published after suitably disguising them. Three of them were identified by the editor, but nine of those papers were actually reviewed afresh and only one paper was accepted for publication. This demonstrates the "randomness" of the review process. Is it prudent to encourage young scholars to publish in these top journals? It makes me wonder if the limited research capability in the country can be better utilised in pursuing genuine research relevant to India rather than be wasted negotiating the unfair review processes in the hope of obtaining a publication in a top tier journal.

The fourth chapter highlights the ethical violations as a result of pressure to publish in top journals. According to the authors, unethical behaviour in management research include using others' ideas without acknowledgement, republishing already published work, and "tidying" data and results to make findings more significant. They refer to a paper which suggested that 25% of the papers at the Academy of Management conference had ethical violations. Other survey results cited in the chapter indicate that a high proportion of respondents were aware of their colleagues indulging in unethical practices to have their papers accepted in top journals. Other violations examined suggest that pressure to drive up publication numbers is forcing researchers to slice the same research into multiple papers, retrofit hypotheses to suit the results and "gift" authorships to others for reciprocal gain. While many of these violations are by people desperate to save their tenure or obtain a promotion, the chapter also highlights how editors "play the game", to ensure that their journal obtains or retains a high rating, by often coercing authors to cite papers from their journal to increase its ranking. While I do not want to condone the unethical actions of authors, it is quite depressing to know that the editors may have their own pressures to indulge in unethical behaviour which ultimately hurts the cause of knowledge. In light of this situation, should we pressurise young researchers from India to publish in these journals? Are we likely to "push" them into unethical practices to overcome the huge barriers that exist?

The seventh chapter is written by a very prominent scholar, William H. Starbuck, who has also been the editor of the *Administrative Science Quarterly* (ASQ), besides occupying many other "gate-keeping" roles. Based on data acquired during his editorship of ASQ, he suggests that the correlation between

decisions to accept, revise or reject by reviewers was 0.12 arguing that "knowing the recommendations of one reviewer gave no basis for predicting the recommendations of the second reviewer" (p 88). He also suggests that there was almost no relationship between the recommendations of the reviewers and citations received by papers after publication indicating that the review process was a poor predictor of the quality of the paper. He argues that the review process in the top journals is so unable to separate superior from inferior papers that "erratic publication decisions cause half of the best articles to appear in second-tier and third-tier journals" (p 89). Further criticising the process he argues that "reviewers' advice to editors is so unreliable that having evaluations from five reviewers would yield no better editorial decisions than evaluations by two reviewers do" (p 90). He attributed the high quality of papers in the top tier journals not to the review process but to the fact that top scholars submit papers to them because of their ranking. As a doctoral student I was always advised, and I used to do the same with my students, to send my work to top tier journals so that even if it was rejected the paper could be improved based on the reviews received. I now wonder whether I will still provide that kind of advice in the future.

The twenty-second chapter examines an issue that is affecting business schools, including mine. It is the "dreaded journal list, which outlines the quality of publications in the absence of reading said publications" (p 188). The core argument of the article is that a paper needs to be read to assess its scholarly contribution and the publication of a paper in a particular tier of journal is a poor measure of quality. The author argues, "When our reliance on journal lists expands, scholarship contracts" (p 188). The author suggests that often "such lists seemed to be motivated and created by where certain list creators or political players were able to publish and then, subsequently, successfully lobbied for those journals to be included on "the list" of their institution" (p 190). He suggests that a focus on publication in top management journal hurts diverse research programmes. Further, the careers of scholars who are doing unique work that is not represented in the agenda of the journals on the list are negatively affected. Should we allow scholars to pursue their own passion and publish in journals of their choice or should we constrain them to publish in a list of journals that are on the select list due to a flawed process?

In the twenty-fifth chapter another very prominent scholar, Charles C. Snow, suggests a solution to the problems indicated above. Based on his experience as co-editor of an open access journal, *Journal of Organization Design*, he argues that researchers should publish in open access journals to avoid the flaws of the review process in traditional journals. A good quality open access journal does a quick review to maintain quality but does not "distort" the article while trying to satisfy various theoretical or methodological constraints, some driven by motivations of reviewers and editors unrelated to the pursuit of knowledge. This allows readers to access a paper as originally envisaged by the author(s) and make their own conclusions about its contributions. He suggests that some of the open access papers have higher level citations than those published in traditional top tier journals. I speculate that just as Wikipedia, with crowd sourcing, reviewing and editing, has replaced traditional encyclopaedias that were dominated by a set of elite scholars and publishers, as a reliable source of

information on issues of interest, open access journals will replace so called top tier journals. I believe, without much evidence at this stage, that reputed open access journals might provide a better chance for Indian scholars to present contextually rich theoretical frameworks and empirical work to the world of management.

In conclusion, I recommend the book to readers more for them to learn about the flaws of the publication processes at top tier journals rather than as a resource book to facilitate publishing in them. While the intent of the book was to help researchers publish in the best management journals, the articles are very relevant for those of us who want to promote alternate journals that are suitable for the Indian context just like the open access journals have created space for a different kind of research. First, we can learn from the experiences of editors and authors that have been presented in the articles. We can prepare guidelines to improve the review process for authors, reviewers and editors. Second, we can ensure that we do not fall into the same ethical traps that those publishing in top journals of management have experienced. We should try to avoid being drawn into the citations and impact factor gaming and focus on quality.

However, most important for me is that we should not be beholden to the so called top journals to guide the agenda of research in India. What gets published or not published in them appears far more “random” than one would expect. While none of the articles in the book explicitly discusses it, much of the so called “randomness” can actually be explained by some “not-so-blind” influence peddling in an otherwise blind review process. Authors with established reputations or those affiliated to better established schools and those well networked into particular circles are more likely to have their papers accepted in the top journals. While trying to promote an alternate journal in India, we need to guard against the same tendencies because as a society we are more susceptible to indulging in “in-group” behaviour to favour our own.

**Disclaimer:** The views expressed in this review are that of the author and do not reflect the views of the journal or his employer.

Abhoy Ojha  
*Indian Institute of Management Bangalore,  
Bangalore, India.*  
E-mail address: [aojha@iimb.ernet.in](mailto:aojha@iimb.ernet.in)