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Getting to Know Scholarly Journals

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ENGL 630: Multiple Literacies: Explorations of Reading and Writing
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Getting to Know Scholarly Journals
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[Slide 1]

Good afternoon! I'm so pleased to be here today--and to welcome you all (or welcome you back) to the University of Michigan. I know it's the first meeting of this class and we're really jumping right in, but I'm grateful to Anne and to all of you for allowing me to meet you and come speak with you today. Our topic today is: getting to know Scholarly Journals. I understand that later this semester you'll have an assignment to choose a scholarly journal, do some research about it, and introduce it to your colleagues. Today's session is meant to give you a little background on this topic, as well as a few tools to help you get started on that assignment down the line. Please note that on the first slide here there is a short URL that you can use to access these slides directly. There is also a link to the full text of my remarks, so that you can follow along or revisit them later.

Throughout this slide deck I link to a number of licensed library resources. In order to be sure that these work for you from home, you will need to be connected to the U-M Virtual Private Network (VPN). If you have not already set up your VPN access, I will ask you not to do it right now because it will distract from our conversation, but a link to the instructions is in the slides for you, in case you need it later.

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Before we go any farther, I'd like to give a little summary of what it is that I do, because my job title is a bit unusual. I'm a librarian, and in more normal times I am based in the Hatcher Graduate Library (today I'm at my home in Ypsilanti). I'm the only person on our campus with the title of research impact librarian, which is a new and emerging specialization in librarianship. My role is to work with scholars across disciplines, empowering you to establish a strong public identity as a scholar, to create an account of your work and contributions to scholarship, and to develop a persuasive narrative and body of evidence for the impact of that work. Beyond our time together today, I would love to meet with you individually at any time, whether to discuss the assignment we'll be focusing on today, or your work and plans more broadly.

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Today, though, our main topic is that of scholarly journals: what makes this particular form of communication unique? When and why would you want to be able to pick out and evaluate a particular journal--and what are the different lenses you might use to focus that work? And given that foundation--where do we go next? Anne has graciously

given me 30 minutes of your class time for this. My aim will be to speak for about 20 of those minutes, in order to leave a little time for questions and discussion. Let's see how we do.

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OK, so--what's special about scholarly journals?

Does anyone have any suggestions or ideas you'd like to share out loud, or in the chat box?

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There are lots of things one could say about scholarly journals--but I will just highlight a few characteristics that are most relevant to our discussion today:

- The current model of the scholarly journal--though it has evolved in some important ways--is in other ways not much different from how it looked back in the 17th century, when this form first emerged. The image on the slide here is from the first issue of the Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society--generally recognized as the first peer reviewed scholarly journal in the tradition we still follow today. To my mind, the key unique features of a scholarly journal like this one are:
- Its quality as a published serial -- it's an ongoing, open-ended exchange among scholars, deliberately continuing, and deliberately made public (what we mean by public can be debated--not all scholarly journals are easily accessible to all readers. But the point is that the journal emerged in order to create a continuing public record of scholarship--not keeping scientific discovery in private correspondence).
- Another key component is peer review, or some version of it--the idea that work published in the journal has been reviewed and approved--by appropriate experts.
- The practice of citation creates a complex web of references creating a traceable pathway of ideas emerging and evolving through exchange. This also establishes a record of credit for ideas and discoveries, and a practice of acknowledging the authors of earlier discoveries. Of course we cite all kinds of other things, too, not merely journal articles. But there's a particular standardization to the practice with journals that allows for quantitative analysis--more about this in a minute.
- Finally, just to give a sense of scale, there are tens of thousands--probably between 25,000-30,000 scholarly journals actively publishing at this time--as well as archived research published from tens of thousands of others that are no longer publishing. It's a vast and sometimes confusing space.

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Which leads us into our central question for the day: when, and why, would you want to find, select, or compare journals? Let's pause for a moment to think, and if you have any suggestions or ideas, please enter them into the chat...

[Slide 7]

OK, so, lots of good ideas here--first of all: you have an assignment! That much we know.

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Here are some other examples of (perhaps more natural) scenarios in which you might find yourself:

- Perhaps you've found an article--you want to use it in your research, assign it to a class, or share it with others, but first, you want to evaluate its source
- Or, as you grow into your professional space, you want to determine which publications you should be following regularly to keep up on emerging trends and discourse.
- Or, perhaps, you are ready to publish your own work and you need to find the best venue for publishing
- Or, you're developing a syllabus and want to identify a range of readings from a number of sources
- Or, you're going to be evaluated by some external party--you're applying for a job, for promotion, for a fellowship, etc., and your evaluators--who won't be experts on your work--need to understand the context for your work, including the venues where you've published.

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It's worth thinking carefully about why you're trying to identify a journal, and what you're looking for when you compare it to another, because this will inform the approach you want to take evaluating the journal. For example, you might be looking to assess a journal based on any number of these criteria. Usually we're looking for some indication of scholarly excellence, but this might be measured in any range of ways, from the peer review process, to the acceptance rate, to the reputation of the editorial board. You might be looking for an outlet that publishes quickly, that focuses on cutting edge work, that actively amplifies underrepresented or marginalized voices, or that has made careful choices about author agreements and copyright policies that are respectful and generous to authors. Or any number of other reasons that aren't mentioned here!

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Once you have a clear idea of what you are looking for in a journal, how can you find this information? The rest of this presentation will focus on a handful of different perspectives that you might bring to bear on understanding and assessing scholarly journals. I'll also mention some tools you might use in this process. This list is by no means comprehensive--it's meant to provide some examples and a place for you to start.

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First, one can approach evaluating journals through a bibliometric lens. By this, I mean by looking at quantitative scores that are meant to say something about the impact or importance of the journal. Usually such scores are calculated by counting the number of citations to a given journal, in light of how much the journal has published, or compared to how much other similar journals have published and been cited. I'm starting with this lens not because it's the best or most appropriate one, but because it's often what people think of first when they think about evaluating or ranking a journal. You're likely to encounter this as you progress in your career, and it's worth having this approach in the back of your mind before we move on to other approaches.

The primary example in this category that you're likely to encounter is a metric called the Journal Impact Factor, or JIF. This is a score that is issued every year by a company called Clarivate Analytics, who own the database called Web of Science, which has indexed millions of scholarly articles. Each year, Clarivate assigns a Journal Impact Factor to every journal in its index, and there is a big hullabaloo each year in the scholarly publishing year when the new JIF's come out. The JIF is calculated by taking the number of citations to a journal in a given year, divided by the total number of citable articles published in the previous two years. The JIF was initially developed in the 1960s as a guide to help librarians determine which journals are most central to the current scholarly conversation, to guide their subscription and collecting decisions. The drawbacks to the JIF are widely known and well publicized. Some of them may jump out at you even in this very brief teaser of what this metric entails. Others may become more evident to you as you explore further. The issues with the JIF impact different disciplines and journals to different degrees, but persist across all of them.

And yet this measure seems to persist, and as you continue on in your career, you're likely to be asked at some point to say something about JIF with respect to your publications--so it's worth knowing that it exists, what it means, and how to find out more.

To that end, I've linked to a couple of resources here: the database Journal Citation Reports, which is available to you through the U-M Library, allows you to look up the JIF for any journal indexed by Web of Science--as well as to explore some other bibliometric scores. There are many other measures besides the JIF, but this is perhaps the best known one. Beneath here, I have linked to a short manifesto called the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment, or DORA. Developed at a conference in 2012, the Declaration makes a number of statements about how to approach research assessment responsibly and ethically, including addressing some of the known issues with the Journal Impact Factor.

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Ok, so, what are some other ways that we can think about assessing a particular journal? We might instead focus on editorial characteristics. This might entail looking at the names of the editors and editorial board, carefully reading the scope and content note for the journal to understand the kind of work this journal is looking for and most likely to publish, learning about the peer review process--how are reviewers assigned? Is the process single or double blind, what criteria are reviewers asked to use, etc.? In addition, you might look to a published acceptance rate for the journal to get a sense of how selective it is--is it publishing most manuscripts it receives, or rejecting most? In general you'll find this kind of information directly on a journal's website. The resource I have linked here, the Platform for Responsible Editorial Policies, is a quite new tool that I just learned about within the last few months, It provides guidance and standards for what one should look for in assessing a journal's editorial commitments.

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Another approach you might consider is to look for the journal's affiliations and visibility. Is it associated with a trusted organization, society, conference, or institution? Again, this is information you'd likely find on the journal's website. You'd also find the reverse: the journal would be identified on the website for the relevant organization. You might also be interested in checking where the journal has been indexed--if the journal shows up in major scholarly databases, such as Web of Science or Scopus, that means it's passed some kind of review by a selection committee, which provides some assurance that it has been vetted for legitimacy. Beyond that, if it has been indexed in lists that are specific to a certain discipline, such as the Modern Language Association's International Bibliography, or a database like PsycInfo for Psychology, that will tell you that the journal is both recognized as legitimate and also that experts have deemed it relevant and an important source for students and researchers in those fields. The Ulrichsweb

directory of serials--also available to you through the library--is a way to check all the places that a given journal is indexed.

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For today, I'd like to suggest just one other possible approach to selecting and comparing journals, and that's to take a look at the publisher and their policies. You might want to check whether the journal is published by a large commercial publisher (like Elsevier, Springer, or Wiley), by a society (Like PMLA, though many societies have outsourced their journals to big publishers), by a University Press or other academic publisher, or, more recently by the emerging community of academic library publishers. The mission, values, size, specificity, etc., of the publisher, may affect how rapidly publication happens, how much support you get with things like copyediting and formatting, whether any costs are associated with publication (as well as with accessing the journal), and what their policies are for your re-use of the article after publication. You'll be asked to sign an author agreement--read it!

There are a few resources linked here--the Sherpa Romeo database has archived information about publisher policies, in particular, whether you are permitted to post copies of your article elsewhere online, such as in a repository or on your personal website. The Committee on Publications Ethics guidelines will provide a useful baseline on what a legitimate and ethical publisher ought to be doing to meet their obligations to authors--things like transparency around peer review, costs, and policies for retractions, discovery of plagiarism, etc.

Finally, I am linking to a page on the library's website, which includes boilerplate language for addenda to author agreements. These have been reviewed by our copyright librarians and any authors are encouraged to make use of them. This is language that you could use as an attachment to any author agreement you may be asked to sign, to ensure that you retain appropriate authorial rights to use your work.

[Slide 15]

So, I've thrown a lot at you quickly, and I recognize again that your class has only just come together for the first time. My hope is that you'll take some time to think about this topic and explore some of these resources when it's appropriate and makes sense for your work--and that if you wish at that time, that you'll reach out to me for a conversation or consultation. My contact information is here on the slides.

[Slide 16]

Here are a few other resource that may be of use as you continue to explore this topic and begin your journal assignment.