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Is There A Crisis in Middle East Academic Publishing? The View from a History Journal Editor

MICHAEL C. GROSSBERG

I would like to begin by addressing the central question placed before me at last fall's Middle East Studies Association meeting: "Is there a crisis in Middle East Academic Publishing?" As the editor of a flagship disciplinary journal I know the answer I am supposed to give: Yes! I know as well that should acknowledge that my journal is part of the problem. And I know why: The *American Historical Review* (*AHR*) does not publish enough articles in the field. Nor do we publish enough book reviews, and those we do publish are always of the wrong books. In short, we are guilty of marginalizing an important body of scholarship and thus helping provoke this crisis.

I know the required response because those are the same complaints that I have heard from Latin Americanists, Africanists, Asianists, Eastern Europeanists, Medievalists, Ancient historians, political historians, military historians, diplomatic historians and many other groups of specialists in my discipline. Indeed when I became editor of the *AHR* seven years ago perhaps the one point of agreement among these disparate specialists was that the journal should properly be called the "NATO Historical Review" because it primarily published work in history of Western Europe and North America. And, I will acknowledge, there is some truth in the complaints.

But instead of simply issuing a *mea culpa*, I want to argue that this is a time of opportunity for publishing Middle East scholarship as much as it is a time of crisis. I want to do so by discussing some of the general challenges facing scholarly journals and then some specific ones confronting a general or flagship journal such as the *AHR*.

A Foundational Moment

I want to begin by identifying the significance of this moment in time in scholarly communication. I am convinced that this is a foundational moment for scholarly journals. Interrelated, indeed reciprocal, intellectual, market, and technological changes are transforming the way that we construct, review, and produce scholarship in our journals. These fundamental changes are pro-

ducing problems, but also opportunities. Two examples illustrate that point.

The first comes from another scholarly crisis of our time, the decline of the basic medium of scholarly communication in the humanities and some of the social sciences – the monograph. The situation is dire. There are dwindling numbers of monographs being published, dwindling press runs of those that are published, and dwindling purchases being made, especially by libraries that, in turn, face budget cuts yet also massive increases in science journal costs and rising demands for new services. Nevertheless, monographic scholarship remains critical to scholarly development in many disciplines. Indeed in some ways it is both the best and worst of times. For example, the global community of historians has produced the richest understanding of past that we have ever had, including critical new work on the history of the Middle East. Yet publishing that scholarship is increasingly difficult for market not intellectual reasons. Malcolm Litchfield, the Director of Ohio State University Press, has responded to this crisis between market and intellectual control of scholarly communication by raising two questions: "Could it be that backing away from the market model would be to everyone's advantage? Might it be possible to rescue the marketplace of ideas from the commercial marketplace?"¹ Our answer to both questions must be yes, but we must also explain how?

One explanation reveals the foundational challenges facing journals. The American Historical Association (AHA) has recently conducted a comprehensive study of doctoral training in history. Its forthcoming report will question whether the monograph standard should continue to govern our scholarship and our decisions about tenure and promotion. The report will also question whether we should continue to rely on an economically troubled industry – university and commercial presses – that by its own admission cannot publish books on the basis of scholarly merit alone. Finally it will contend that too many books are published that instead should have been converted into journal articles or monographs of more middling length. In fact, the

report will recommend that the AHA launch a new genre of refereed, subscription-supported scholarly works that would be longer than articles but shorter than conventional monographs [70-120 pages]. The report urges that priority in this new form of historical scholarship should be given to studies that are intellectually important but not commercially viable, including market marginalized fields like Middle East history. And, to return to the subject of these comments, it recommends that the *AHR* should be the primary publisher of this new form of scholarship. That recommendation coincides with related arguments that articles should be given a new importance in humanities scholarship and given the same the intellectual and disciplinary significance that they have in many of the social sciences. And in a similar fashion, others have suggested that journal articles are particularly appropriate sites for experiments in electronic publication.

Developments like these suggest the foundational consequences of current changes in scholarly communication for journals as producers of scholarship. They also help explain the emergence of calls to create a new authoritative role for journals as primary instruments for saving fields and scholars marginalized by the market. And, in turn, such changes can create new opportunities for publishing in field like the Middle East.

So too can a second example of foundational changes affecting journals, the advent of electronic publication. One history journal editor has put the situation starkly: "Scholarly journals that do not respond creatively to the online environment will become a fringe technology, a curiosity. They will no longer have value to add to professional discourse."² I agree. Journals such as the *AHR* must enter cyberspace to continue to perform their basic disciplinary missions. And, for instance, as the editor of the *AHR* I have responded to this foundational challenge by helping create the first non-profit, disciplinary electronic publication organization: The History Cooperative. Our intent is to make the Coop a central site for the production and dissemination of historical scholarship by adding journals that represent a range of historical fields and methods and by adding other forms of history to the site such as primary sources and conference proceedings. The site can be surveyed at: [<http://www.historycooperative.org/>].

The consequences of taking a journal online have been significant. It means that we now produce two journals, one print and one electronic. The two are gradually diverging because the *AHR* contains materials that cannot be replicated on a printed page. Electronic publication has also compelled us to create new forms of scholarship, peer review, and editing. And it has also compelled us to expand our conception of the journal's readership because of the expansive audience for electronic communication. Developments like these dem-

onstrate how the electronic future poses a set of intricate and interlocking issues, questions and challenges that go to the heart of journals as a form of scholarly communication. They must be addressed by all journal editors and by all of us who read and write for journals. Most significantly for these comments, the foundational nature of this moment in journal publishing creates the opportunity to revise the way we use and produce articles and reviews. It is an opportunity that opens up new publishing possibilities for fields excluded or marginalized in the previous journal publication regime such as the Middle East.

Reaching Out to Marginalized Fields

The second issue I want to address is the marginalization of a particular scholarly field by a particular journal. I should begin with my perspective on the issue of specialization and journal publication. I am the first Americanist to edit the *AHR* since its founder, who left office in 1928. During the intervening years the journal was generally considered a European enclave, all of its editors were Europeanists. I made breaking that field hegemony a central goal of my editorship. I did so because it is clear to me that this is a moment in time when the intellectual diversity of our discipline challenges the Eurocentricism that has dominated it for far too long. It is equally clear that this challenge must be taken up in the pages of a flagship journal such as the *AHR*, which has as its primary mission speaking across disciplinary specialties by publishing articles that address theoretical, methodological, and substantive issues of concern to all historians. Equally important, a journal like the *AHR* can take up this challenge because it does not operate under the same market constraints as monograph publishers.

In trying to expand the intellectual range of the *AHR*, I have learned that disciplinary marginalization comes in many forms. Indeed, as I noted at the outset, the fragmentation of history has bred feelings of marginalization among almost all groups of historians. Now even Western European historians argue that they are marginalized by the rise of fields like World History.³ However, my tenure at the *AHR* has led me to conclude that the lack of engagement with the full geographic and temporal dimensions of the past are the most critical forms of disciplinary marginalization in history. Studies of the world outside of North America and Western Europe and of times before the late eighteenth century are the most neglected forms of historical scholarship today. Obviously the Middle East falls into both categories. Critically, the marginalization of this scholarship has been institutionalized to such a degree that a journal such as the *AHR* simply does not receive many article submissions or reviewable books in fields like Middle East history.

However, I have also learned that confronting these problems raise critical issues of disciplinary power expressed in terms of field hierarchies and customary practices. It also means trying to change the perceptions of a journal held by many scholars and presses. And thus the challenge of publishing work on past pasts and various parts of the world poses fundamental questions about the value historians place on fields marginalized by the academic marketplace and by our curriculums. Consequently, despite my intentions, making the *AHR* a primary medium for publishing the full geographic and temporal range of contemporary historical scholarship has been very difficult.

Nevertheless, the editors of the *AHR* and I have tried to achieve this goal in a number of ways. We have actively solicited article manuscripts and books for review in under-represented fields of study. And we have tried to broaden the scope of the journal's articles by combing through annual meeting programs of various historical organizations looking for papers that could be converted into articles. We have tried to enlarge scope of book reviews by establishing new relationships with publishers of book on subjects ignored by the journal in the past, and by surveying the book review sections of specialized journals for important works that have not been sent to us. And we made structural changes in the journal, most notably a reclassification of the *AHR*'s book review section. The new system tries to address the spatial and temporal dimensions of current scholarship more effectively. It is purposefully less Eurocentric and contains new trans-disciplinary categories such as Methods/Theory and Comparative/World.

Our greatest successes have been in Asian and Latin American history. We have had less success with the Middle East, but we are trying similar tactics. And we have devised new approaches, such as adding members to the journal's Board of Editors with specialties in under-represented fields and hiring specialists to help locate reviewable books in those fields.

As a result of these various efforts, I have learned that tackling the marginalization of scholarly fields by journals poses a dual challenge. First, publishing work that represents the full temporal and spatial realities of the past confronts the entrenched power of specialization itself. The reality of its sway was evident in responses to a readership survey by the *Journal of American History*. When asked, "What do you like most about the journal?" most respondents replied: "Cutting edge-work in my own specialty!" But then when asked, "What do you like least?" they said: "Cutting edge-work in other specialties!" These reactions reveal in stark form the problem of promoting general, cross-disciplinary work. Second, tackling the problem of the marginalization of fields in scholarly publishing also means challenging those excluded to join the struggle.

The obvious point must be made: a journal cannot publish what it does not receive. Thus overcoming field marginalization in history requires, in part, that historians of the Middle East send journals such as the *AHR* their article manuscripts and books. I realize, perhaps more than most scholars, the difficulties of crafting scholarship that speaks to those who study other times and places. But I am convinced that marginalization will be overcome only when scholars demonstrate their willingness to engage those outside of their specialties.

In the end, I would say that during my term as editor the *AHR* has followed a "Field of Dreams" approach to the problem of disciplinary marginalization: We have tried to rebuild the *AHR* and so historians like those in MESA will come. We are waiting for them to do so.

Conclusion

I want to conclude these comments by reiterating my basic point: as a journal editor I think this is a time of opportunity not just crisis for the publication of Middle East scholarship. There are opportunities for publishing Middle East scholarship in journals such as the *AHR* because they are not as market driven as presses, they do not have intellectual quotas on books or articles, and journal articles themselves may well be increasing in importance in many humanities and social science disciplines. So now is the time to tackle this critical issue.

NOTES

¹Malcolm Litchfield, "... but Presses Must Stress Ideas, Not Markets," *Chronicle of Higher Education* (28 June 2002), B9.

²Christopher L. Tomlins, "Wave of the Present: The Scholarly Journal on the Edge of the Internet," *American Council of Learned Societies Occasional Paper* 43 <<http://www.acls.org/op43.htm>>.

³See for example, Lynn Hunt, "Is European History Passé?" *Perspectives, Newsmagazine of the American Historical Association* (November 2002), 5-7.