Episode 57: Carole Sargent

# KL: Katie Linder

# CS: Carole SargentKL: You’re listening to “Research in Action”: episode fifty-seven.

# [intro music]

# Segment 1:

# KL: Welcome to “Research in Action,” a weekly podcast where you can hear about topics and issues related to research in higher education from experts across a range of disciplines. I’m your host, Dr. Katie Linder, director of research at Oregon State University Ecampus. Along with every episode, we post show notes with links to resources mentioned in the episode, full transcript, and an instructor guide for incorporating the episode into your courses. Check out the shows website at ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast to find all of these resources.

On this episode, I am joined by Dr. Carole Sargent, Founding Director of the Office of Scholarly Publications at Georgetown University, and CEO of a global nonprofit, Academic Authors.  Dr. Sargent guides faculty to high-impact scholarly publishing for tenure and promotion. She has a PhD from the University of Virginia and publishes in eighteenth-century studies.

Thanks so much for joining me today, Carole!

**CS:** Thanks, this is a lot of fun. I’m glad that we’re reunited.

KL: Yes! So we had actually previously met, and I had brought you to a previous campus that I worked at to talk to our faculty about book proposals based on your work at Georgetown, and thought also this would be a great interview, you know, to have you on the podcast as well, because you’re so knowledgeable and you’ve been in the industry for such a long time. So let’s talk about peer review journals. Let’s start there, and getting to them. How do we get to know our top peer review journals? So first of all, how do you define a top peer review journal?

**CS:** Well the key word there is peer, because really the definition of what makes a peer review journal peer reviewed is how key scholars in the field regard it, and how they regard the scholarship. And that’s a very vulnerable piece of the equation. People imagine that there is a formula and you can decide, you know, how to rank these, but I think scholars who engage more deeply that the formula is pretty crazy. And we’ll talk more as we go along about how crazy the formula is and what you can do about it. But a top peer review journal, for the most part, is one that everyone reads, everyone cites, and that true combination of reputation and a numerical formula that we will look into, it has moved into the top ranks there’s a big vulnerability there. For example, in my field of eighteenth century literary studies, there are a couple of top journals that have lower h-index rankings. Why? Because only a handful of people in the world read them. They just happen to be the most influential people in the world on that topic. So as you can see, that formula is a little weird, and that’s why I put more emphasis on reputation than I do on the numbers.

**KL:** That’s really fascinating. I’m excited to dig in a little bit more into some of the metrics. Before we do that though, I would love to know if you have concrete ideas for how researchers can figure out the top journals in their respective fields if they’re not sure.

**CS:** I like to go to what I call the silent mentor, and the silent mentor is the record of the stars in the field, where they’ve been and where they’ve published, because the stars are always going to be in the best journals, and they’re always going to help decide what the best journals are. And that, of course, becomes much more important when we have newer journals, and whether or not they’re going to be accepted by guard. Part of that is going to be in the hands of the stars, for better or for worse, right? Because we all know, like in any field, some of the big celebrities also have feet of clay, but they’re there. They’re powerful, their word matters for something. So I look into places. First I look online, and I do due diligence through a research librarian. And this has been a lot of fun, because research librarians are way underused, and some of them are so knowledgeable, and to go to a research librarian who has not just library degrees but also has a research field is very, very precious time. And sit down with that person and figure out what the top ranked people are and why. Determining what the top ranked journals are isn’t that hard. You can even do that with an online search. I just like to work with a librarian to make some of those niche calls. But the reason why it’s so cool to work with a librarian is that they can really dig into the numbers with you. They can help you see what those citations really mean, and they can help you calculate what the reputation of a journal is in your field. For example, whether you want to be with the American Historical Review, which is the flagship journal of their society, or whether you want to be in a history journal that’s actually in your subfield? That’s a hard decision to make, and I’m not saying the librarian will make it for you or should, but the librarian will give you the tools to make that decision. So I like to do it that way. There’s also SJR journal ranking online that is super helpful. It will just, just Google these and boom! It pops right up. You can actually compare journals to each other and compare. Let me know though when you want me to get into the vulnerability [*laughs*] You can’t just, like I said, rank them on a list, it’s a ticket to crazy town. We have to weight these things in kind of an interesting way, but that’s where I would start. I would start with a research librarian, and then I would also start with the silent mentor, the CVs of the stars in my field. One reason I don’t ask you to talk to the local mentor, the ones from your department, is that they can be helpful, but also sometimes limit their advice by where they think you should be, and I don’t like to leave that in other peoples’ calculations. I like to decide for myself where I should be. So I look where they’ve published, not where they tell me to publish.

**KL:** So these are great concrete tips and I promise we’ll get to the metrics, but I also am wondering, when you talk about these silent mentors, I’m wondering to what degree people should be looking not only at where they’re publishing but where they are on editorial boards for journals. If they’re the ones making those decisions, is that also a helpful thing to look for?

**CS:** Oh yeah, and I’m really glad you brought that up because the board is in many ways the engine room of the journal. People imagine the journal runs at the editorial level, with the editor and managing editor and that team, and it does on a day to day level, but where this journal is going intellectually and how it wants to position itself vis-a-vi other journals, is all going to be a board conversation. And as we get a little more into the podcast, I want to talk about actually how one should and might consider even approaching someone on the board to understand the journal. It’s a great next step, what I’d say is I like to get a sense of the range of journals and then I do this really interesting dive into the culture of each journal, and the board is a fabulous place to start. There are vulnerabilities there too, for one thing people can be on the board for political reasons and not because they care. Okay, that’s maybe kind of obvious. Also they can be there because of political reasons and do care, but their input is not helpful. We see that happen a few times, where someone is on the board, it looks good to have them on the board, but they’re not the best spokesperson for the journal, maybe the editor is a better one. So what I say is I like to consider the board as far as its helpful, but I don’t let myself get stopped by the board. Because let’s face it, they can be as powerful as they want, but they’re not the ones that are going to go thumbs up or thumbs down on your paper, that happens through a different process. I do think though it’s neat to know the board for other reasons and one of those is there are times when your work may end up in the hands of one of the board and knowing who those people are, what they study, what they care about, and it’s all available online, universities make this very clear, is I think is a very helpful aggregate snapshot of what’s going on at a journal. So yeah you’re right board is, I would say about 40% of my formula is board, maybe 30% of my formula is board.

**KL:** Okay, so I’ve held this off from the metrics and numbers long enough, let’s talk about what kind of metrics make a journal highly ranked.

**CS:** Right, and well that’s going to be where you have an immediate problem with SJR, you’re going to go online and you’re going to say, “Wow that’s great, Carole Sargent said I should look up this tool”. Or you’re going to go to your research library, your research library is going to say, “Hey look, this journal has an H-index number of blank,” and because of that high number that going to be what they call high impact. Well, let’s think about it for a moment, what is high impact? Is Donald Trump high impact? Yes. Does that mean that he has the complete buy-in of all of his colleagues and constituents? Not quite, he’s very controversial. So controversial work can be high impact, and also bad work can be high impact. Why, because people cite it as such. So while it’s true that good work often gets cited and often allows a journal to rise, it’s also true that controversy and dubious results can also attribute to that number. And that’s why I never worship a number in of itself, and that’s why probably most thoughtful scholars don’t. There are other reasons as well, one is that the h index is a relative number. So let’s say for example, the h index by the way is a metric trying to compare how many times a scholar is cited and where, and you can look online for a good definition of it, and I hope if you’re really thinking about it, you can think about ways this would work really well and ways this would work really poorly. Let’s say for example a new journal. It’s going to have by definition a lower h index, why because the older ones have been cited more. They’re also more known. In an electronic work it’s easy to find work that’s new and I think that’s nice, it’s helping to even out some of these numbers, but it will never completely overcome the controversial or dubious work that’s being cited a lot. Now when good work is being cited a lot, then the scholar him or herself also gets the number and in a world with Google Scholar online, were all going to be assigned numbers. And for some of us that’s exciting and for some of us that’s terrifying!

[*laughs*]

Individual scholars are now putting into their tenure files, hey I have an h-index of and then they give a number, because Google Scholar told them so. You can hear the skepticism in my voice, I’m not sure what world this is bringing us into, again does it reward the scholar who has a big loud conversation and does it work against the person whose doing more niche work? I think possibly, and so I really like to take these numbers with a big grain of salt. That said, your institution is looking at these numbers, they won’t just say oh, if you’re publishing in a high impact journal you’ll get tenure, but what they will say is how are you deciding your journals and are you looking at impact as one of the important keys that you’re considering to choose a journal. I also, this is why I like people to choose a journal in close conversation with anyone whose going to be voting on them. And that will help you decide things like should I go to a niche one that’s having more of a precise conversation in my field, or should I try to go to something like PMLA which is the flagship journal for the modern language association. All of those, the American Historical Review, PMLA, the American Political Science Review, APSR, Nature, Science, all of these big brand name journals are wonderful to hit, but at the same time, what their impact is and what they’re actually based on becomes a fascinating question, and I think it’s good to see. For example, look at journal, what is its most cited paper, is it cited because it’s really good or is it cited because it caused a lot of controversy, people love it or hate it. Why do certain things get currency in the world of scholar citations? I’m always fascinated with that, and I find it can be anything from merit to buzz. And when it’s merit, yay we’re excited about it’s a big contribution and it was rewarded; when it’s buzz that’s why Michelle Flucoe is the most cited scholar, it’s because people have heard about Michelle Flucoe and it sort of makes it’s own circle. You hear it, you cite it, you cite it, you hear it, and that’s, when the decision making process comes in, I hope that the thoughtful scholar will have all these tools SJR, what the librarians have given you and what your mentors have said, what your team has said and then your own good research at the journals. And also, I’m going to teach your listeners a sneaky trick for getting into journals more consistently, and then, like as the last thing you’ll have my sneaky tricks.

**KL:** Awesome, well I feel like Carole we are just scratching the surface. When we come back we will talk a little more with Carole about how to get into a high ranked journal. Back in a moment.

[*music plays*]

# Segment 2:

**KL:**  Carole, it may seem like kind of an obvious question based on some of the things that we discussed in segment 1, but I’m wondering if you could talk a little bit about why researchers would want to publish in top ranked journals?

**CS:** Well I have a counterintuitive reason because I believe that most people can imagine that they can be career makers, that it can be really important or interesting to get into a flagship journal or one that is a conversation leader in a certain area, or one that is a household name. But I can think of another reason why a lot of researchers may want to aim for these journals and that is sometimes it is ironically easier to go for higher. No one believes me when they first say this, but as they think about it, they start to understand how and why this could be true. Not always, but sometimes you are going towards functionality when you go up in the hierarchy of journals because you’re going towards what, funding, good staffing, people who know what they’re looking at when they’re looking at your stuff, and good peer reviewers who are willing to review for that journal because they want the engagement and they want the shine. Now do not mistake this for saying all cream rises, that is simply not true. There is too much going on politically and we know too many examples of places where somebody fantastic is laboring at lower level journal, or somebody brilliant publishes in one that’s not the flagship, so don’t hear my ever saying that’s how it works. But there can be that ironic sort of interesting moment where it can be easier to go higher because you’re simply going to where more of the money is, and where more of the people are and the other one that’s fun about it is a lot of people weed themselves out of those journals, so there can be a traffic jam. I can’t tell to you how many scholars have told me for example, oh I applied to a journal X or excuse me, I submitted to journal X, and I was rejected but I got great peer review, now I’ve revised my paper and I’ll go to a lower ranked journal to see if I get in. And I say, why would you go lower? Your paper is stronger now, your work has had the benefit of wonderful peer review, if it was me and my paper I would go higher. And I would always feel comfortable with doing that even with a paper that had been rejected at a higher ranked journal because one nice thing to say to the editor, and I’m getting ahead of myself a bit because this is part of the revise and resubmit process. You can say hey, these got bounced out on these merits, I understand that, but it’s now been thoroughly revised with these in mind, would the journal consider it again, and there are times when the journal will say yes. So I’m really stunned, I think what authors don’t understand is that you can communicate with editors. Don’t expect any editor to read your whole paper, no one has time, but they are willing to look at really thoughtful abstracts that have been really carefully constructed and show your contribution. And this is a funny little side thing, but people think an abstract is a funny bit of paper you stick on at the end, but I say it’s a big tool, and it’s a great way to communicate with editors. But going back to that whole thing of why would a scholar want to choose a top journal, I personally think you should take your research and shape it in a strategic way that I’m going to explain in a minute, for the very top. You should always, no matter who you are, no matter where you are, consider that you have a valuable contribution to make to the field and that there’s a really good discipline in knocking on the doors of the best journals and seeing who would be interested. I had a faculty member say to me at one of my recent seminars, yeah but I’m at, and she very legitimately named a lower ranked campus in the city where I was, and I said guess what, some of the journals even have a priority to publish your voice, they’re not supposed to be just publishing the voices of the polished few, they’re supposed to be expanding the conversation. You could be a fantastic gift to that editor who needs to open the conversation out more. And she kind of looked at me, and you could tell she was kind of thinking about this, I said don’t weed yourself out, lots of people weed themselves out of the top conversations without ever giving themselves a chance, and that’s my final reason for saying you should go to the top journal. Your colleagues, both at your institution and at other institutions are weeding themselves out, they’re stepping out before the race has even started and they’re leaving more space for you. We’ll address in a few minutes how and why the high reject rates always scares people off, but I never think that’s really scary, it’s actually a pretty controllable number.

**KL:** I, I mean this is fascinating information, and I especially like your point about people putting themselves out of the race before they even start, and I often think about that with grant writing as well, that people just don’t even approach it, so I think that that’s an excellent point. I’m wondering if we can shift to talking about some practical strategies that researchers can use to get into a top ranked journal, especially taking into account what kind of the largest challenges are, as people move to putting articles in these journals. So what are some things you recommend, Carole?

**CS:** Well the first thing I recommend is turning around and facing the target you want to hit. So many scholars write a paper in isolation and then try to send it into journals, and I say that’s just as crazy as trying to park a car in the dark, wearing a blindfold. How can you do it, it’s not possible, and that’s why the reject rates are so high even with good research. A lot of times a journal will just notice, and this can be what people call the desk reject, where they don’t even send it out to readers, they just say no thank you but hold it on their desk for a month before they do that. To them it doesn’t bear any relationship to what’s going on with the journal, remember that every journal believes that it is the center of a key conversation, and guess what, it’s right. The journal never would have survived if it hadn’t in some essential and core contributive way, been deemed important to a field and its conversation because that’s the only way it’s going to get good scholars. The first thing you do while you’re developing your research and before you write your paper is you study, you study the years of the journal under the current editor. If the current editor has been there six months then you may have a trick, but if the current editor has been there at least a year or two or more years, that editor represents a particular editorial vision. It is not the complete decision of the editor, we just talked about the power of the board, but that’s a piece of it. So that’s the period of time I like to be responsible for, and then I go into the journal articles that speak to my field and speak to my topic, they do not have to be on my topic and they do not have to be exact, but I’m just looking for the stew, the milieu, what am I going into? And as I get a feel for that, wow do I get cool ideas. For example, and this one was with PMLA, I went in there looking at the years under the current editor, Simon Gikandi, and I said here is this brilliant editor, this amazing career, so I read up on his career and then I go looking in the journal for what’s been going on for the last couple years. And what should I see but a call for papers. And this call for papers was for a special issue and it had to do tangentially, not directly, with what I was working on. And so, you know for me, I never could have known that if I hadn’t relaxed and put my research aside and went and looked what was going on with the journal. When a journal feels that your contribution comes in relevant to the conversation they’re having, that’s a rare submission, and that’s an exciting submission.

**KL:** I love that. I love the idea too of just being open to exploring what’s going on with the journals you’re interested in and really familiarizing yourself with them, getting to know them, going on their websites, looking to see who’s working with them. I’m wondering if you can talk a little bit about kind of the typical timeline that researchers should be expecting if they’re looking to put an article in a top ranked journal. Is it a pretty broad range or is there a certain timeline you can expect?

**CS:** Oh lord it’s anything from 15 minutes to never. And I don’t say that completely flippant and facetiously, I have seen very, very functional journals, and I have seen some rampant dysfunction. It is a problem because journals move institution to institution and some scholars are better than others at making the trains run on time. So I got a very fast turnaround for example from English Literary History, and some beautiful comments from the editor, they didn’t accept the paper but I just felt like they were efficient, they were gracious, what a beautiful experience. And then I went to a journal which shall not be named who sat on it for six months and then finally got back to me with this really apologetic, oh we’re so sorry we never sent it out, that special issue deadline already passed, would you mind submitting it to the regular journal? And I thought why should I ever come back to you? For people on the tenure line where that can be a real problem, here’s a method that I recommend, and I’m going to sort of run through my method real quickly and you can ask me questions about any piece of it that sort of grabs you. There’s a great book by a tenured professor at Princeton called, “Writing your Journal Article in 12 Weeks”, and even though it’s written for graduate students, my faculty members love it.

**KS:** So I have to pause you Carole and say we had Wendy Belcher on for our first episode of Research in Action. Yeah, so if listeners are long time listeners, they know of her book, but I refer our listeners back to episode 1 where we talked about that book and talk with Wendy.

**CS:** Well you picked the right person then, because I couldn’t admire her more. And one of the things I really admire about her is she doesn’t sit around and write how to write books, she does her research, so if you actually look at her research output it’s prodigious. And that’s the only people I’ll ever recommend by the way is people who actually do the work. So yay that you had Wendy Belcher on, and I would say to anybody listening to go listen to that first podcast and then go get ahold of her book. But she recommends a method where you create an abstract, and we’re not talking 150 words but maybe a bit longer one, and once you feel that you’ve cased out a couple of journals and you have a sense that it could go here, it could go here, it could go to the other place, send a note to the editor. And I start with the board myself, but here’s why: I like to warm up and the board is a good place to look for potential colleagues and friends and conversations, every time I have looked at a board of a journal, I’ve seen somebody I know or I could know. Either through grad school, or Georgetown where I work now, or through other universities I visited, anything that would allow me to legitimately reach out and say, “hey, I noticed you’re on the board, would you have a look at an abstract?” And you’re not asking anyone for too much work if you do that, and that’s an idea I got from Wendy Belcher. You would legitimately ask a board member or an editor, “does this look and sound like something that might be on point for this journal?” Faculty members come up out of their chair to object to this, and say almost to a man to a woman that this is not done in their field and this would offend people. And I laugh because I say, I’ve had so many people try this and so far no one has been offended, mostly they’ve been flattered and they’ve really enjoyed the fact that someone noticed they were on this board. And why would you be on a board really, if you think about it, why would you do it unless you want conversations about the journal? And this is a legitimate conversation, other people have thought that I was suggesting that they would sort of cheat. How is it cheating to talk? And also you’re not asking them to speculate whether your paper would get in and you’re not asking them to read the paper, you’re just asking them to look at an abstract and think with you. People have been lovely. Once you do it either way, whether you go to the board or whether you go to the editor you get cool information, you get “wow, we haven’t announced it yet, but we have a special issue coming up, you could think about keeping it for that,” to “Oh no, I love your idea, but we just accepted one almost like it. You haven’t seen the article yet, but it’s coming out soon”. Sometimes you even ask them, “oh no can I see a pdf of that?” and it’ll help you, sometimes you get scooped, that can happen. We get all kinds of, and sometimes you get no answer at all, and do you know what no answer at all means? You might have a dysfunctional journal. I know that there was one where I never got an answer, and I was pretty offended, until boom, it got announced it was at another university, probably that email went to nobody until the journal moved. So that’s, I suggest that you start in the world of the journals, but once you have it down to three finalists, that’s the time to make a great abstract, read Wendy’s book first, because I don’t want you doing this without a guide, she’s such a good one, and then consider dropping a note to someone at the journal or connected to it. Another good person to ask, but not the best, is someone who’s published in the journal. They may be helpful, but sometimes they don’t know why!

[*laughs*]

You say, “Oh you had that big piece in the American Political Science Review and how did you pull that off.” Or Harvard Business Review, which actually isn’t a good example because it’s not peer reviewed, but one of these big journals. And the person will be like, “Ehrm, beats me! You know, I love my research but I’m not exactly sure why it made it versus it didn’t”. But some of them know, some of them can tell you very interesting story about having gone to peer review in other places. Notice that none of them at no point have I said polish your paper until it’s perfect. I see almost no benefit to that. People keep telling me, “oh if they’re a typo they’ll reject it”. I’ve never seen anyone reject genius for a typo. And genius comes in with typos all the time, I’m not saying make typos, don’t get me wrong, but I see no reason to polish something for nobody.

**KL:** I think that’s, I’m so glad you raised that, it makes me think of, so I’m an associate editor for a journal, for the International Journal for Academic Development, and we’re way more concerned with fit than we are with perfection. In making sure that the piece fits the aims and scope of the journal and the direction that the editorial board wants and is hoping for the journal. I think that’s such a great reminder for writers who struggle to get the piece out the door because they always think there is something they can do to make it better. I would be way more concerned with general fit with the journal than with perfection.

**CS:**  And I’m glad you mentioned fit because that was one of the things that the journal Signs said to me, I called their editor, I talk to a lot of journal editors, and I was talking to their editor about that exact thing of fit. She said that they had a meeting and that that period, I don’t know if they’re still doing this, but they were going to be more overtly feminist. Someone who doesn’t know that and thinks, oh I need to tone down this whole feminist thing, I’m not sure that’s what I think when I think of Signs any more, they would actually be going the opposite way, where the journal has just said they’d like to go now. So I really think these conversations with editors ahead of time can give you the opportunity to, if the editor will have them, and I would say probably about 85% of the editors have been willing to venture a little opinion to that. And let me come back around to that, because when you’re trying to submit to a journal, and you’re thinking about it in this really intelligent way, you’re analyzing the journal, you’re reading papers from the journal, and here’s the power question. When talking to an editor, ask the editor are there certain articles that has been really, really– that really exemplify what this journal does? Some of those are outliers, because maybe their authors were stars, but some of them are papers that they really just love. So go study those. You know if you study, even to being a complete nerd and mapping it, if you study published papers that journals consider to be really successful, you’re going to be down to a small number of papers, and you’re going to be down to the heart and soul of what the journal really cares about. Because wow are they proud of that. Now sometimes they’re going to help you. You’re going to go to their website and it’s going to be right there for everybody to see, oh look we have these papers, we think they’re great! So yeah, study those. But let’s say none of those really resemble what you’re doing, ask the editor, that’s a great ask the editor question. I’m really curious, I’m doing a comparative approach, I don’t really see that reflected in your journal, is that a problem, would you like to see more of it, if it is good, can you think of one that worked for you? You know, etc. there are a lot of ways to frame that question. But notice that all of these things, whether we’re talking about the board, whether we’re talking about working as a peer reviewer, or whether we’re talking about submitting to a journal, they’re all reflective of the notion that a journal is culture. And that a journal is made up of people, and you’re really trying to get to know people. This, by the way, is a great use of conferences, I looked online with PMLA and saw that for the last several years at the MLA conference, I don’t go to the MLA conference, I go the one in my own field 18th century studies. But at MLA they’ve had a panel of how to get into PMLA and they’ve had editors and people from the board and they even have people that got published there. Some of these journals have been really active at conferences, and I don’t think authors really realize that that at their conferences could be these quiet little conversations that change your whole life!

**KL:** Absolutely, our journal does that as well, we have a session at a conference where we discuss how to get into the journal. And I think all the things you’re talking about here in terms of asking questions and engaging with editors, it’s just reminding researchers that editors are people too, and they’re happy to engage in communication and conversation. Well Carole I feel that you just dropped all kinds of nuggets of wisdom throughout this episode.

[*laughs*]

I want to thank you so much for taking the time to come on the show and talk about your experiences with publishing in peer reviewed journals, in high ranked journals and also in turning journal articles into books, so thank you so much!

**CS:** You’re a big star and this was an honor, so thank you too.

**KL:** And thanks also to listeners of this week’s episode of Research in Action, I’m Katie Linder and we’ll be back next week with a new episode.

[*music plays]*

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# Bonus Clip #1:

**KL:** In this first bonus clip for Episode 57 of the “Research in Action” podcast, Dr. Carole Sargent asks Katie questions about Journal Editing and Peer Review – take a listen.

**CS:** Actually to flip it back to you for just a second, how many times does somebody reach out to you with just a little abstract to look at who has already studied your journal carefully, really knows the conversation right now, and is just asking you a subtle question about it, is that a pretty rare note?

**KL:** It is rare, and I would say, I can’t speak for the editors because I’m just an associate editor, so it’s possible the editors are getting those kinds of outreach. But as an associate editor, no, and I’ve been doing this for a couple of years, I have not had authors reach out to me. I have had some really interesting dialogs with authors and reviewers, along the way, when people strike up a conversation with me about a piece that either they’ve submitted or they’ve reviewed, and that has been really fruitful I think on both ends, to hear from authors and reviewers about their experience with the journal and what they’re trying to do with their pieces.

**CS:** Well then I would also be interested in our agreement or disagreement on this point which is from the reviewer’s side – one great way to get to know a journal is to review for it. Now sometimes some journals say you have to have published in a journal to either be on its board or to review for it, others say no, not necessarily, they just need people with credentials in the right fields. But peer reviewers, I think, are doing too much, I encourage them to keep the peer review to lean minimum. You weren’t asked to rewrite the paper and you weren’t asked to tell the author what they should have done, you’re asked whether it should or should not be published and why. And that that’s a much, I think mercifully smaller question for both parties because the peer reviewer, sometimes stuff gets stuck in peer review, because the peer reviewer is spending too much time on this, and making too much of a giant case out of it when it should be leaner. And also a lot of times, the authors who submit don’t read it! I can’t tell you the number of authors that come to my office with peer review that say I can’t bring myself to read this. I’ll read it for them by the way, the peer review. But would you say this system would benefit if peer reviewers, if more people would volunteer for peer review and if the ones who were selected would do kind of a quicker leaner job?

**KL:** Well, I definitely think a quicker job. I think every journal editor you’ll talk to will say the turn around time for reviewers is often a challenge, but the other thing that I found actually really interesting is that we always send out peer reviews to the reviewers anonymously, so they can see what other people said about the paper, and that is what I get the most feedback from reviewers on. They’ll say thank you for letting them see what other people said, because it helped me to hone my own kind of editorial and opinion about this piece. And of course we do it after the fact, after everything is in. So I hear a lot about that. I mean I would also say it really depends on, as a reviewer, do you take the approach where you feel like you want to mentor the people who are writing the article. And I think if you want to do that and you want to mentor people, then you can take the time and add in some additional information about, you know, you didn’t cite such and such, and I really think you should, or, you know, those kinds of things, but not everyone takes that approach. Not everybody feels like they need to be using their review as a mentoring opportunity. So I see it both ways, but I think that it’s . . . Whenever I review, it always benefits me, I always learn something. And so I like to take the time to really do it in a way that, you know, is going to benefit both parties, myself and the writer. I do think that it’s hard. It’s hard to balance reviewing with other service obligations we have, and making sure we can turn it around in a way that makes sure these journals are moving forward and can be efficient and aren’t wasting authors’ time.

**CS:** Well also, journals sometimes very obviously pick the wrong peer reviewer, and it can happen for a couple of reasons. One reason the wrong peer reviewer can be picked is most journals look to the early citations in the paper and the author very innocently and unwittingly cited all of their opponents. And by the way, I advise not to do that, but to contextually frame the beginning of the paper so that the citations make sense for someone who would be consulting them to think about who might be the peer reviewer instead of just randomly citing, say, some outdated piece of research because it happened to be first. But another one is it can legitimately go to the wrong person, because every editor of the journal is an expert in everything, right? They have to wear all the hats. And so as a peer reviewer, you receive a paper and it’s not quite right for you and instead of sending it back to the journalist and saying “not for me”, point out she’s a colleague that’d be great for it, get that name and then write back to the journalist and say “you know what? This isn’t for me but it would be dynamite for so and so and this other institution and hey I just shot them an email and they said they would do it” you know, that’s going to me a great way to a – and I don’t want to get too much on the other side on the desk, obviously we’re still coming as this from the submitter’s side.

**KL:** You’ve just heard a bonus clip from episode 57 of the “Research in Action” podcast with Dr. Carole Sargent asking Katie questions about Journal Editing and Peer Review – thanks for listening!

# Bonus Clip #2:

**KL:** In this second bonus clip for Episode 57 of the “Research in Action” podcast, Dr. Carole Sargent discusses Turning a Journal Article into a Book - take a listen.

Carole, one of the things that I’d love to chat with you more about is how journal articles can set up books. So first I thought if you could offer some examples of journal articles that became books that you are aware of.

**CS:** Well that’s a really interesting one because I can actually offer one of my own first and, uh, a journal article that’s becoming a book and how it’s treated by the universities press editors. I published an article, an 18th century studies about a pie fight in political satire in 1709 and my thought was “okay, 18th century studies, this applies to [inaudible] my field and it should help an editor” how did I know this? Book editor I mean, because book editors told me this. Here’s what book editors told me and I’ll tell you what happened with it, the book editors told me that peer review is much higher – a much higher standard at the journals and should be. If book editors forced every book into the kind of meniscal, granular, peer-to-peer arguments that we have at the journals, they would never publish another book, right? Because these books have to be a bigger statement, sometimes they ask the authors to make a leap – sometimes that leap is controversial. And book are really the place for that, where you’re going to layout your vision and be the central thinker here. There’s a lot going at the successful University Press book that is different from happens at the journals. University Press editors, many of them but not all, many feel vulnerable – why? Well most of them don’t have PhD’s, that’s not a bad thing, actually just reflects and alternative path that they took in a lectual life to go more towards book publishing than to go to teaching in a university and I think a lot of my authors imagine that University editors have a PhD, I say “some do, in fact I know quite a few that do but not the majority is in my experience and even when they have a PhD they’re being asked to wear so many hats” I met one editor who has been given another list while a colleague left and you know, she was now doing humanities and social sciences, it was a really kind of tough balancing act that she was doing. And so no editor, no book editor can never have enough expertise in all the fields to really look at it and just go like “oh I’m looking at this manuscript and it’s very creditable.” And you don’t want to have to go look for peer-review every single time just to answer that question, because you want to decide where to invest your time to even review. This is where the journals, and an appearance in the journals, becomes key. A book editor wants to see, typically, and every statement I make has to add the words, and you can all see it along with me. Not always, [*laughs*] but typically a book editor wants to see an appearance in a key journal on this topic, because that’s part of public intellectual life. It’s going to go a long way towards making sure that this book is ready to go out there. And, also, it makes the editors less vulnerable. They don’t want to look stupid. You go into a meeting with your other editors, and it’s not usually the board, I misspoke, You go into the meeting with other editors and at your press, and you have this manuscript and you’re really interested in it. You’re thinking of making an offer, you want to be able to give them some reassurance. Or let’s say it hasn’t gone out for peer review yet, but you want to do that and it costs money to send it out for peer review. You kind of want to have a little reassurance that this has already passed the scrutiny of the peers. One thing about journal publishing versus book publishing is it doesn’t cost anything for a journal to put out your article. It’s already going to put its issue out, so it’s not investing money in you. A book investor is investing a minimum of $15,000, and it goes up from there. So really, you’re asking a lot more of a book publisher, and I think the journals, they could be key. Here’s how it worked out for me at Yale, and it was kind of fun. It was also sad, but it was more fun than sad. It’s that I did have that key thing, then I sent it out, and I actually had three presses interested, and I ended up going a different direction with the book. And so when Yale got interested, one of the reasons was I had been in the right journal and one of the people I cited was one of their previous authors. For a publisher, then, that can be a quieter conversation where they could just write to the author they just published and say, hey, this article just came out in eighteenth century studies, and I’m considering whether to send out a book for peer review on it. Would you just glance at the article and tell me if you find this author credible? And they can do that. It’s a much quicker calculation than reading a whole book manuscript, right? So because there’s a very efficient form of scholarly communication, I encourage that even if a press is willing to send a book out without it, and this is for the peer review process. The peers are going to sniff every once and awhile, but not always. Again, once in awhile the peers go to some tenure committee and say, well, that’s all well and good that this scholar published a book, but we really consider that a lower of peer review. Why has this person not appeared in the key journal? And the scholar will protest, but they didn’t tell me I had to! They just said I needed a book for tenure, nobody said anything about the journal! Well your department may not be as excited about the journals, but a lot of times that tenure committee is, and sometimes it’s made up of not just, you know. Sure, sometimes there’s scholars from your institutions, but typically, at least at the Research 1’s, and I think at a lot of schools they’re more interested in the outside scrutiny. What do those outside scholars think. Some of them have a huge investment in what’s going on in the journals. So for you not to appear there almost seems like not, seems unforgivable, omission. I don’t want any of my scholars to be in that position, and also, a journal article will come out more quickly. [*laughs*] That’s laughing to say when journals seem to publish so slow, but books are even slower. And since we’re in a snail race in all of this, it can appease your mentors and committees and everyone else to have a key appearance in a journal on the topic.

**KL:** One of the things that I think . . .

**CS:** Oh!

**KL:** . . . Do you need to add something?

**CS:** Go ahead. No, I started to, and then I said I’m going to go and let you ask me another question.

**KL:** Well I was just going to say one of the things that you point out, Carole, is how publishing is a relatively small world, particularly in academic presses and publishing, and editors do reach out to former authors they’ve worked with. And they do have a staple of reviewers that they trust, and it’s a pretty small world, in terms of who know who and how to get connected with editors who might be a good person to work with on your book. And that kind of leads me into thinking about if a researcher suspects that their journal article could set up a book, what should they do?

**CS:** I would reach out . . . Well, for one thing, book publishers tend to tell me that authors don’t come to them nearly early enough, because authors tend to come when they have a bow on it. So here’s my submission, here, I’m ready to go. Let’s go! Let’s go to the peer review! And the book publishers I talk to say it really helps to hear from authors a lot earlier, and it really helps to hear from authors in a more formative stage, when they’re not asking you to pass judgement on them. When they’re more asking you to think with them. A good time to do this is at conferences. One editor told me that it really, at her press, she gets credit for talking to you at a conference, because she has to fill out a form after the conference is over saying who did I speak to, about what book? You know, so we can gauge whether or not it was worth it to spend the money to send editors to these conferences, because it’s very expensive, right? And so there, at the conference, she gets credit for talking to you, and if you make an appointment with her ahead of time she’s happy to sit around and shoot the breeze for a limited amount of time on the book project she’s told you she’s interested in. This is also a great way to talk to a whole lot of editors, but you might not have enough to show them. Here’s where the journal piece becomes so interesting, and key. It’s almost like a calling card. It becomes this little point of opening credibility, and so I would go early, even as soon as you know you have an acceptance. As soon as you’re accepted by a journal, but it’s not going to appear for a year. So what? You’re accepted! Now’s a good time to reach out to a bunch of different editors to talk to them at your next major conference, or I even say at a conference outside of your field. For instance, the American Political Science Association conference is going to be in Philadelphia this year, and I plan to go up and talk to some editors, but I’m not actually going to sign up for the whole conference, I’m just going to pay $10 for a floor pass to go see some editors. You can do the same thing when you know there’s going to be a big one in town. Again, you have to write to people ahead of time, and they have to know you’re coming, but it works really, really well. What you can also do, though, with this article-to-be, and I recommend this in two ways. One is while you’re developing the article, feel free to reach out to the scholars you’re citing, especially if you’re relying heavily on their work. Other scholars, they may welcome conversation with you about how you’re citing them and whether you get it. Wouldn’t that be fascinating? And it’s perfectly legitimate, this is not out of school. If I’m relying on the work of a scholar, and I know that she’s at this other institution, I drop her a note and I say hey, I’m not going to ask you to read the whole paper, but here’s the passage where I cite your work. Would you take a look at it and tell me if you sound well represented? I’ve always gotten back big, long conversations. And what’s so cool is that, now that we’re in scholarly communication, and I’m growing my piece, one way it can take another turn because now I’m engaged with this individual. And who knows? Maybe we might decide there’s a whole new way we can take it, or at the very least when it’s ready to go out for peer review, there’s a chance that it could end up with this person. And by the way, that’s not too close. Some people stay far away, don’t poison the well. You don’t want to be communicating with a scholar who won’t qualify to be your peer reviewer. Honey, they’re only not qualified to be your peer reviewer if they’re your colleague, they were your dissertation director. If you just know somebody in your field, that’s ok. [*laughs*] We all know people in our field. I think they disclose to the editors. I would say so and so would be a great reader, but, full disclosure, we talked about these ideas. We talked about them at a conference, we talked about them via email. Most editors will not rule that person out because of that. They’ll go thank you for disclosing, they need to know, but they won’t rule you out. The thing to remember, I think, about book publishers, and also about journal editors, is that they want to publish scholarship. There happen to be here for you. A lot of people imagine that their job is to keep you out, and I say no, not really. Their job is to be selective, that doesn’t mean keep you out. What that means is demand to conform the work to, what you said, fit a certain conversation, and have certain characteristics that make it a reasonable publication from this journal or press now, but that’s not the same thing as saying they’re trying to keep you out. One other thing to consider is that while you’re having this conversation, you’re writing while you’re talking. Right? So you’re talking to editors, you’re bouncing ideas, you’re having them say, ah! Man, I love this! And I don’t respond at all like that. Don’t take that as marching orders, because no one should tell you what to write. You’re the author, you’re the authority. However, you’re considering it. You’re saying hmm, you know, that book editor said as cool as that idea is, only my peers care. Maybe I will run that by a couple of other editors and ask them what they think. And then you’re going to know they’re in . . . Let’s say you spoke to another editor at Princeton University, and the editor said interesting ideas here, but honestly that’s such a peer-based conversation, I think you should take it to the journals. I don’t think it’s a book. And so then you happen to see from the University of Virginia press. Wonderful opening line, but I was talking to so and so from Princeton, and yeah, he thought it’s not a book, but I think it is a book. I wondered what you see, you think. This is also an argument from mastering two pieces of real estate. One is the abstract, to talk about your journal article, stop making people read your article. Read this longer abstract, or the intro piece. And the other one is the perspective for the university press. People are sending around whole manuscripts, and nobody has time until they know from you that this is a good use of their time. And another thing is why would an editor read a whole manuscript if he or she didn’t have some kind of assurance it was a good use of their time? The journals will help them decide that.

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