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Michaël Tatham

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Farewell note: a decade as RFS Editor

Michaël Tatham

Department of Comparative Politics (Sampol), University of Bergen, Bergen, Norway

ABSTRACT
This farewell note reflects on a decade of editorship for Regional & Federal Studies (RFS). It draws on this experience to highlight some areas of change and continuity in the journal's life, the publishing industry, and the profession at large. Over this time interval (2012-2023), the journal has gone through changes in personnel and editorial strategies. Meanwhile, both academia in general and academic journals in particular have undergone processes of professionalization and digitalization, with knock-on effects on how they function. Publishing models are changing, but also publishing patterns in terms of author characteristics (gender, geographical origin, career stage). To some extent, academic journals are a microcosm of the profession and of certain societal trends. In the midst of this, Editors continue their work, both adapting to these evolutions and seeking to steer them in a meaningful way.

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In June 2023, I processed my last manuscript as an Editor for *Regional & Federal Studies (RFS)*. This marked the end of over 10 years of editorial work at the journal. I started as an Editor in September 2012 having just moved from the Humboldt (Berlin, Germany) to the University of Bergen (Norway). Personally, it was a period of professional change: gaining tenure as an Associate Professor and acceding to the role of Editor in my field's main journal at (more or less) the same time. Back then, I did not expect that I would stay a decade at the journal, including four and a half years doubling up as Managing Editor. If anything, I expected to stay a few years, before moving on to something else.

However, I quickly got sucked into an exciting and absorbing world. Back in 2012, I joined a team which was renewing itself. Under the leadership of

CONTACT Michaël Thatham tatham.michael@gmail.com Christies gate 15, Postboks 7802, 5020 Bergen, Norway

Nicola McEwen, the team was composed of Wilfried Sweden, Jan Erk, and me. Not only were Jan and I new to the team, but the team's interests were also widening. Nicola was broadening out towards questions of constitutional change and public policy including environmental, climate, and energy questions (McEwen and Bomberg 2014; Royles and McEwen 2015), eventually leading to her switch from a Professorship in Territorial Politics (University of Edinburgh) to a Professorship in Public Policy (University of Glasgow). Wilfried was expanding beyond his core interests in territorial politics in Belgium, the UK, and Western Europe, to add insights from India and South Asia (Swenden 2012; 2017), eventually leading to his award of a Professorial Chair in South Asian and Comparative Politics (University of Edinburgh). Jan was similarly diversifying, away from his core work on federalism in countries such as Austria, Belgium, Canada, Germany, and Switzerland, and moving towards questions of federalism and decentralization in Africa (Erk 2014; 2015), eventually leading to an appointment at the Université Mohammed VI Polytechnique of Rabat (Morocco).

This diversification of research areas within the editorial team spilled over into the journal, in terms of its strategic development and publication patterns. *Regional & Federal Studies* was growing out of its core focus on Western Europe to embrace questions of territoriality in the rest of the world, especially the global south (Harbers et al. 2021, 12). At the same time, the journal was engaging with comparative research involving multiple cases around the globe to a much greater extent (Harbers et al. 2021, 12). Similarly, as the methodological profiles of the Editors spread towards wider pluralism, including historical, legal, or statistical approaches, the journal also diversified the methodologies underlying its publications, somewhat decreasing the dominance of qualitative single-case studies, to make greater space for qualitative-comparative as well as quantitative research (Harbers et al. 2021, 14).

The journal continued this path of broadening and diversification as the editorial teams further renewed themselves. Wilfried would eventually take over from Nicola as Managing Editor, before also retiring from the journal after a decade of involvement. I would take over from him as the journal regenerated again: Nicola, Jan, and Wilfried were replaced by Louise Tillin, Imke Harbers, and Christina Zuber. These new appointments followed a clear strategy of making the journal the global reference point for the study of territorial politics worldwide. Indeed, Louise brought her expertise on Indian and South Asian politics (Tillin 2006; 2015), Imke on Latin America and India (Harbers 2010; Harbers, Richetta, and van Wingerden 2023), and Christina on Eastern as well as Western Europe (Zuber 2011; Zuber 2022). Each new team continued the journal's tradition of methodological pluralism with its members covering different methods from inductive to deductive, single-case to comparative, qualitative to quantitative, observational to experimental, legal-historical to socio-economic approaches, among others.

As I depart, the journal continues its inexorable evolution. With the number of submissions persistently growing, the editorial team has been extended from 4 to 5 Editors, with Arjan Schakel and Rotimi Suberu bolstering its ranks. They bring their own expertise and skillsets. Rotimi is a leading scholar of Nigerian and African politics, ethnic and religious conflict management, as well as federalism and democratization processes (Suberu 2001; 2009; 2015; 2022). Arjan is one of the original authors of the Regional Authority Index (Marks, Hooghe, and Schakel 2008a; 2008b), an indicator which has transformed the way we study regional politics. He has since diversified his interests to shed light on multilevel voting patterns, regionalist parties, as well as broader questions of regional democracy and citizen preferences (Massetti and Schakel 2021; Schakel 2021; Schakel and Romanova 2022; Schakel and Smith 2022).

Thus, the journal carries on its march towards becoming the global reference point on territory and politics. My stepping down is an opportunity to observe some continuities and changes both regarding the journal itself but also its wider professional environment. Indeed, in the past decade, some changes have been observable.

The first one is that of professionalization. Academia itself has continued to professionalize over time. It has done so in its training, recruitment, and promotion practices, but also in its organization: of the universities themselves and of the publishing industry around them. Much of this professionalization has manifested itself in the 'formalization' of processes and interactions. For example, the contracts that Editors sign with publishing houses are lengthier, more detailed, and no longer come across as somewhat amateur as they once did. The publishing houses themselves have larger legal and ethical services, whereas these were initially relatively limited. These developments reflect trends in the sector, but they also reflect the importance that publishing has taken in academic careers, university recruitment, higher education evaluations, or the securing of external funding.

Similarly, the 'digitalization turn' has been gradually embraced. Whilst many journals previously worked via email (to the Editors or to a secretary/assistant) this has now become the exception. Almost all journals have switched to digital platforms, with automated receipts, reminders, and acknowledgement messaging. This facilitates management and archiving. It also decreases the amount of manual emailing in favour of (quasi-)automated processes. Similarly, digital platforms make it easier for Editors to avoid unfortunate referee choices: colleagues sharing an institutional affiliation with a submitting author are flagged up by the platform as preferably avoided, whilst the platform's algorithms suggest potential reviewers, sometimes usefully. Human supervision and decision-making remain key, but the automation of many of these processes has sped things up and also helped eradicate the odd human mistake. In 2011, I was somewhat amused to receive, from a top-5 International Relations journal, a review request for my own co-authored paper! Such mistakes are now next to impossible.

Digitalization has also led to more transparent processes. Authors can now keep track of the status of their manuscripts at all times. And the digitalization of the workflow makes it easier to generate useful statistics about turnover times, speed of publishing, acceptance rates, or a host of citation metrics (impact factors, CiteScores, SNIP and SJR). All this information has helped demystify the publication process. Over a decade ago, one would rely on word of mouth to get a feeling of which journals had higher/lower acceptance rates or turnaround speeds. This gave undue importance to networks and insider knowledge. This information is now routinely available on the journals' web pages. On the downside, some of this information sometimes generates unfortunate expectations, which disappoint authors. For example, the acceptance rate at RFS is traditionally relatively high. This is because the journal publishes many Special Issues (SIs) in addition to the Annual Review of Regional Elections (AroRE). Contributions to both SIs and ARoRE are screened at the proposal stage (i.e. prior to submission), with weaker contributions advised against submission or recommended to be redeveloped prior to submission. This leads to high acceptance rates for the pieces which do end up submitted, hence inflating the overall acceptance rate. This has led to some disappointment among authors of regular standalone submissions who had expected higher chances of publication.

As professionalization and digitalization have gathered pace, so have expectations, especially when it comes to turnover times. A decade ago, I experienced it as common to receive reviewer reports 3–4 months after submission (i.e. between 100 and 120 days). And it was not uncommon to have to wait longer. Today's norm varies considerably, but many political science journals reach a first (post-review) decision within 2 months. Authors' expectations have certainly followed suit, with corresponding authors often expressing concern after a handful of weeks. These expectations sit somewhat at odds with the nature of being a journal Editor: essentially an unpaid side job, which often comes at the cost of the Editor's free time or research time. It is hence understandable that many journals have increased the size of their Editorial teams to face the rise in submissions and expectations of rapid turnovers.

Another development which has been noticeable in the past decade is the evolution of the publishing industry. The journals and their paywall or subscription models have come under criticism, leading to the emergence of Open Access journals where one pays to publish instead of paying to read. In the middle of all of this, a number of hybrid models have emerged, whilst national public funders have increasingly struck agreements with publishers for national quotas of open-access publishing in return for their subscription fees. This has been a rather noticeable change. From an Editor's point of view, these developments have generated some flexibility. Some years ago, journals had rather rigid yearly page budgets, leading to the rejection of good research (we do not have space for more articles, even good ones) or large backlogs (your article is published online now, but in an issue in 2 or 3 years only). Today, many journals are much more relaxed over page budgets, since many costs are covered by Open Access agreements, either individually or nationally. Although not without some obvious drawbacks, this has been a welcome development, as it has decreased the pressure to reject good research on the grounds of practical concerns. It has also meant that more (peer-reviewed) research is accessible to the wider public.

A fourth noticeable change can be found in the identity of authors. This change has been three-fold. First, academic journals have published increasing numbers of articles by women. As we report elsewhere (Harbers et al. 2021, 15), it is shocking that, in the 1990s, over 80% of *Regional & Federal Studies* articles were exclusively authored by men. This reflected not only an all-male editorial team and editorial advisory board, but also wider trends in the social sciences, academia, and society more generally. Although there is still a long way to go before reaching gender balance, change is nonetheless moving in the right direction. Second, authors outside of the global north increasingly find their way into the journal's pages. Again, imbalances are still striking, but the evolution of publishing patterns gives some reasons for (mild and patient) optimism. Finally, early career authors have increasingly been published. This is not only due to an emphasis on quality rather than reputation or network, but also due to the changing nature of the academic job market and of the PhD process (in Europe at least; possibly less so elsewhere). The job market has become heavily biased towards journal publications (at the expense of teaching skills or the writing of monographs). This means that the incentive to publish journal articles as soon as possible has increased. Meanwhile, the PhD experience has drastically evolved. It corresponds less and less to a long and lonely research process leading to the production of a single-authored monograph. It has moved towards a 3- to 4-year structured programme with research methods and publication training leading to a 'cumulative' PhD consisting of 3 or 4 journal articles, some of which co-authored. Not only are newer generations of PhDs better prepared (methods training, 'how to publish' seminars): their PhD work is expected to result in a handful of published articles. On the one hand, this has been a positive development. It has increased the diversity of voices in the publishing world, injected a dose of dynamism and enthusiasm, all of this on the basis of solid training. On the other hand, it has somewhat changed the PhD experience and aspirations: from the writing of a large monograph, allowing space and freedom for originality and depth, towards the production of stand-alone pieces of knowledge which have to fit the expected 9k-words format. '9k thinking' sometimes feels a bit narrow for a doctoral education, even if duplicated 3 or 4 times. Overall, however, it has been refreshing, from an Editor's viewpoint, to encounter so much quality research from such junior scholars. Each new generation of scholars seems to be improving on the previous one, which gives the discipline much momentum.

In this sea of change, academic journals tend to be slow-moving creatures. And there is an inevitable lag between evolutions and their repercussions in publishing patterns. Similarly, changes in editorial policies only start to have noticeable effects some years after their implementation. In the middle of all of this, Editors keep calm and carry on, continuing with their daily tasks of screening incoming submissions, reading, corresponding with reviewers and authors, and eventually deciding on publication. These are not easy tasks. The majority of submissions are not accepted for publication (and the 'reject' terminology has some brutality in it). This invariably generates some disappointments. Meanwhile, the essence of an Editor's job is to take simplistic dichotomous decisions: at the end of the day, it will always be 'accept' or 'reject'. This can feel strange in a professional environment which values nuance and refinement and usually seeks to transcend dichotomies rather than embrace them. This is, however, a relatively small price to pay. The tasks of an Editor are vastly rewarding. Seeing a manuscript improve through peer-review, publishing ground-breaking research, and disseminating insights on neglected cases or overlooked issues: all give much meaning to the job. At its core, publishing is a highly collaborative venture. It requires the cooperation of authors, reviewers, Editors, and publishers all focusing on the production and dissemination of knowledge. This is not only a rewarding enterprise, it is also a meaningful one.

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ORCID

Michael Tatham http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8388-8193

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