

THE PROFESSION

Getting the Word Out

BY CHARLES GERENA

Thanks to blogs, online databases of working papers, and other outlets on the Web, an economist doesn't need a Nobel Prize and hundreds of articles in academic journals to make a big splash.

Take a paper written in 1999 by economists John Lott, now of the Crime Prevention Research Center, and William Landes at the University of Chicago. It challenged the relationship between concealed weapons laws and the incidence of mass shootings. More than a decade later, the paper remains among the most downloaded works on the Social Science Research Network (SSRN), a free online repository. It also continues to be widely cited, despite the fact that it has never been published in an academic journal.

The Internet has created more outlets for research economists to disseminate their work in progress and participate in policy discussions. Still, getting published in top-tier journals remains an achievement that is valued in the academic world. In fact, it may grow in importance. Faced with information overload, people turn increasingly to sources that they know and trust, and top-tier journals have long been relied upon to separate the wheat from the chaff.

Traditionally, if economists wanted to disseminate their work widely, the usual route would be to present a working paper at conferences or seminars at universities, gather feedback, and make refinements. Then the work would be submitted to a well-known, peer-reviewed academic journal like the *American Economic Review*, where it would be refereed by other economists before its acceptance. With this seal of quality, the paper would be more likely to get cited in other research and in economics textbooks — and being widely cited helps economists gain tenure at universities, get promoted, and win grants.

Things are changing now, according to Daniel Klein, an economics professor at George Mason University. Klein edits *Econ Journal Watch*, which critiques journal articles and follows trends in the economics profession. "Getting ideas out there is a lot easier. You've got these other types of discourse that can gain attention and do have some cultural power" outside of academia, he notes. "It's all part of much broader communications, information technology, and cultural changes."

From the 1970s to 1990s, the average length of the review process at economics journals increased — editors were taking longer to review submissions and requiring more revisions. Although editors are working to reduce production lags, Klein believes some economists are weary of jumping through hoops to get published. "Some of these new outlets don't confine themselves the way the most prestigious journals tended to do," he notes.

Last April, Klein used SSRN to circulate a paper based on his recent experiments with a feature of Google Books that graphs how often a selected word or phrase is mentioned in published work. Less than a month later, Tyler Cowen talked about the paper in his *Marginal Revolution* blog and David Brooks quoted it in his *New York Times* column.

Will Internet publishing ever become a viable alternative to traditional journals? David Laband, chair of the School of Economics at Georgia Tech, is optimistic. Laband has studied publication trends in academic journals and the economics field in general. "The nature of the outlets from which we can choose to indicate relevance to the scientific community and beyond has broadened very considerably," he notes. "I'm quite certain that unpublished manuscripts attract a larger share of citations now than 30 years ago."

Yet there is a downside risk of having more options for circulating economic research, particularly the new crop of journals that are only published online and haven't established a reputation.

"There is increased uncertainty that work published in an online journal that you may not have heard of before is actually significant research," Laband says. Hence, he suggests, economists increasingly use the reputation of top journals as a proxy for quality.

In addition, posting an unpublished paper on a personal website or getting cited by a popular blog doesn't get the author far in academia. "It's hard for material published outside of the established journals to get a lot of establishment respect, even if it is widely read and influential," Klein notes.

As a result, top journals remain a magnet for research economists. A January 2013 study of the top five economics journals by economists David Card and Stefano DellaVigna of University of California at Berkeley found that submissions have almost doubled since 1990, growing fastest since 2000.

Getting the attention of the blogosphere may not get the attention of a university tenure committee or push the frontiers of economic research. For economists who value the role of the public intellectual, however, the online revolution is a breakthrough. Not everyone can have a *New York Times* column, but anyone can opine in a blog.

Also, Laband believes that the profession will benefit from the greater ability of researchers to reach out to lay audiences. "One of our functions as academics is not just to conduct research and contribute to the corpus of scientific knowledge," he explains. It is also to "inform nonscientists about the importance of economics in their everyday lives. We teach." **EF**