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Scientific publishing in a competitive environment: Physical Review Letters and Physics in the new era

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Publishing in prestigious journals is a competitive and selective process. As scientists compete for prime journal space, so do scientific journals for attracting and publishing the best research papers. Further selectivity involves tagging the most interesting and well-written papers as Editors' Suggestions, or highlighting the most innovative and important results in exclusive online platforms such as Physics.

In 2009, Physical Review Letters received some 11,200 new submissions. These were handled by 22 editors, who returned 3200 manuscripts to authors without external review, and transmitted the remaining 8,000 to two or three of the 47,000 APS referees for their critical input. Approximately 2,900 manuscripts will be eventually accepted. Out of these, 200 Letters will be selected as Editors' Suggestions; 120 Letters will receive a Synopsis write-up by an editor; and 85 Letters will be selected for a commentary (Viewpoint) by an expert in the new APS journal Physics.

How do PRL editors judge which papers to reject without external review? How do they conduct peer review for the remaining papers? What makes a paper worthy of highlighting by the editors? What changed in PRL since the July 2009 launch of reinvigorated standards and what are PRL's impact statistics now? What is the impact of the online journal Physics, and how could this affect the landscape of physics publications?

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