Editor’s Message:
The Irreplaceable Value of the Special-Focus Issue

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The Irreplaceable Value of the Special-Focus Issue

Disaggregation, the trend in accessing journal articles à la carte, is challenging the future of the special-focus issue in scholarly journals. Over the years, *Hispania* has featured a number of notable special issues—Pedagogy (2008), *Quixote* (2005), and Portuguese (2002), among others.  

Disaggregation potentially makes themed volumes less attractive to publish. Nowadays, editors and readers interact with the content of periodicals in several formats. Scholarly articles are “stand-alone” items that we access digitally through providers such as J-Stor and Project Muse. For the last decade, searching for journal content online by author, keyword, title, topic, and so on, has yielded undeniable speed and ease of service, making it tempting to dismiss the special issue. However, from an editorial perspective, all articles in a volume of *Hispania* form a purposeful set of scholarship that relies on a specific order and an interrelationship. For this reason, among others, I would argue that the tradition of the special issue is an institution that we dearly want to protect.

Traditionally, the special issue has been a way of collecting and organizing the “state of thinking” on any given topic, scholarly trend, body of works, generation of writers, or particular author or scholar. This format, in one handy volume, stimulates scholarly discourse on a particular topic through a grouping of perspectives and inquiries, which in turn, identifies the “megatrends” in our subdisciplines.

In *Profession 2009*, Rose Mary Salum, Editor of *Literal: Latin American Voices*, points out that scholarly periodicals that publish work across multiple languages and cultures support a global way of life and buttress transnational and multilingual approaches to scholarship (138). Past special volumes of *Hispania* have rescinded some of the barriers among us and accelerated cultural, linguistic, and scholarly fusion, thus achieving the collaborative goals lauded by Salum.

For Hispanists, prestige accompanies publication in a special issue. The Table of Contents often reflects a “Who’s Who” in the subdiscipline. Since Hispanists are widely dispersed geographically, special issues serve the purpose of coalescing a body of work in a definable editorial space.

Some will state that special issues are unnecessary because keyword searches produce a neat list of related articles instantly, without the wait for the publication of a special issue. Others point out that the blogosphere is already enhancing scholarly exchange between academics and educators in the humanities and social sciences, thus rendering special issues obsolete. These are valid points. However, specialized blogs and electronic searches do not replace the “value added” weight of the time-proven special issue. The theme issue offers focal peer review, specialized editors, a consolidation of current thought, a highlight of trends in scholarship, and the bestowal of prestige. Special issues can coexist in the cyber-arena of disaggregated scholarship because, to the educator and academic, they offer something distinct.

The special focus issue is not, nor should be, a thing of the past. As technology redesigns delivery systems for all manner of content, we, as the brains behind the machine, must be judicious in our choice of those new systems, and not be too quick to discard the old reliables, such as the special issue, whose real-world benefits cannot be replaced by the automated convenience of digital delivery.

I have raised this matter to solicit feedback from readers of *Hispania* and AATSP members. I invite you to share your thoughts on this subject as well as on invigorating themes for future special issues.

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1Much of this column is based on my AATSP-sponsored session at the 2009 Modern Language Association titled “Scholarly Journals and the Digital Age: What are the Ramifications for Hispanists?”

2Salum’s article is titled, “Editing Journals across Languages and Cultures.”