Recognizing and Rewarding Peer-reviewers

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INTRODUCTION

Peer review (PR) is the process of submitting an authors’ scholarly manuscript to the scrutiny of other experts in the field.1

History of peer review

Most ancient texts were never peer reviewed. PR was first adopted by the Royal society of Edinburgh, Scotland in 1731 and ‘Medical essays and observations’ is regarded as the first peer-reviewed journal2. The British Medical Journal instituted a process of PR by around 1893. Science and the Journal of the American Medical Association began external peer review around the 1940s. The term peer review began to be widely used only around the 1960s.3 Prestigious journals like The Lancet and Nature instituted PR only in the 1970s.

Types of peer review

Initial PR practices nearly always revealed the identity of the authors to the reviewers though, the authors did not know who had reviewed their paper. The American Sociological review was the first journal to initiate a double-blind PR. A triple-blind process where the authors’ identities are also concealed from the handling editors has been proposed but is not common.5 Traditionally PR was done prior to publication. Post-publication PR is becoming common. Journals publish submitted articles after carrying out a rapid access review and the article is formally reviewed after publication6. During cascading or portable review, journals under the same publisher may transfer reviews and manuscripts. The Canadian Medical Education Journal allows authors to reuse their previous reviews when submitting a manuscript. Non-selective or impact neutral peer review was introduced by the journal PLoS one in 2006 and the Frontiers group in 2007. Only the technical soundness of the research is considered and other factors like novelty, importance and wide interest are not evaluated increasing the acceptance rate and reducing bias toward established institutions and authors.

Open PR where the identities of the authors, the editors and the reviewers are known to each other is also becoming common, and the final review report is published with the manuscript. Collaborative PR where the authors and the reviewers engage in online forum discussions until they reach a consensus on the most effective way to improve the quality of a submitted paper is also being utilized. Open peer commentary was
Co-publishing has been mentioned as an incentive. The manuscript is published with a written invited commentary of about 1000 to 1500 words by an invited expert in the field.

**Challenges with peer review**

Personal biases may influence the PR process. PR can be slow and expensive, inconsistent, and peer reviewers may try to take advantage of the process. Reviewers can ask authors to delete outcomes, combine outcomes, use a different method of analyses which can introduce bias. The selection of reviewers can also introduce bias. Reviewers’ dogmas, preconceived notions, and differences in ideas and ideology with the authors can influence PR. PR may not detect fraud and data fabrication.

**Urgent need for more peer reviewers**

The number of new journals is steadily increasing, creating an urgent need for new peer reviewers. Playing one’s part as a member of the academic community was mentioned as the most common reason for reviewing. Women make up only 21% of peer reviewers and most reviewers were based in the United States, United Kingdom and Germany and less than 2% were from developing nations. The situation may have improved during the last decade. There is a vital need to recruit, train and mentor more reviewers from these groups.

**Recognizing and rewarding peer reviewers**

A few publishing houses control academic publishing today. Companies charge steadily increasing subscription fees and article processing charges (APC). The five largest publishers accounted for over 50% of all research published in 2013. Elsevier is the biggest publisher with a market share equal to the next three publishers combined. Profits can range between 36 to 40%.

In my opinion a journal with APC or subscription charges should reward their editors and reviewers adequately. Small independent journals can recognize their reviewers in other ways. Personal biases may influence the PR process. PR can be slow and expensive, inconsistent, and peer reviewers may try to take advantage of the process. Reviewers can ask authors to delete outcomes, combine outcomes, use a different method of analyses which can introduce bias. The selection of reviewers can also introduce bias. Reviewers’ dogmas, preconceived notions, and differences in ideas and ideology with the authors can influence PR. PR may not detect fraud and data fabrication.

Co-publishing has been mentioned as an incentive allowing reviewers to publish a 1500 word commentary alongside the manuscripts they review. The possibility of indexing the review reports in databases like PubMed and Scopus and linking them to the published research can be considered. Publons and Reviewer Credits are two recent initiatives providing recognition to peer reviews and reviewers.

A survey conducted among 3040 academicians showed 35% were in favour of payment to reviewers while 40% were against payment. The average time spent on reviewing a manuscript is three hours and an article mentions a modest remuneration of USD 50 per hour can be considered. Prospective reviewers may do a more thorough job and retired scientists may be more inclined to participate. Publicising reviews and aggregating them on reviewer hubs, providing certificates of excellence in reviewing and inviting the best reviewers to join editorial boards can be useful. An article mentions that editors and reviewers recruited by the for-profit publishing industry should be rewarded financially and not exploited for free.

There may also be drawbacks with paid reviewers like reviews being carried out for the sake of remuneration and competition for paid reviewing tasks. Reviewers may be more likely to accept assignments from journals paying a larger amount for peer reviewing. A survey among peer reviewers from Asia and developing regions regarding different aspects of PR including the issues of reward and recognition has not been carried out and is required.

Peer review has progressed steadily during the decades following World War II. Not for profit, truly open access journals and those published by academic societies should be encouraged and supported.

**Predatory journals and peer review**

Several predatory journals promise quick, unsubstantiated PR, rapid publication, and have been known to use fake office addresses, editors, and reviewers. A study published in 2018 noted that researchers from 146 countries have published in these journals and an academic allowance system for publishing, peer pressure, and unawareness were among the major reasons. A scoping review mentioned that predatory journals were not transparent, did not disclose details of the publisher, published poor quality articles predominantly from certain countries which were poorly cited, conducted poor quality PR within a quick time frame. Their editorial board may lack legitimacy, journals may lack transparency on
APCs, and may not be indexed.\textsuperscript{18} Predatory journals may have no PR process or do only a superficial PR\textsuperscript{19} and may not require authors to fully address reviewer’s comments. Non-competent persons may review the paper, the reviewer’s recommendations may be addressed to varying degrees and revised manuscripts may not be sent back to the reviewers. I did not come across studies comparing the quality of peer reviews between predatory and non-predatory journals.

**CONCLUSION**

Peer review is today ubiquitous in academic publishing. Different peer review models exist. With increasing number of journals and article submissions finding appropriate reviewers is a challenging task. Rewarding and recognizing peer reviewers is important. Non-financial rewards have been offered by several journals and publishers. Considering the huge profits of big publishing houses, financial rewards for reviewers should be debated.

**REFERENCES**


