

On Review Practice

by

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Conflicts of Interest

Journal publication is the backbone of scholarly research, and it is an essential element of the advancement of knowledge. Yet, like most human institutions (such as voting in Florida), it is imperfect. In recognition of some of the issues that can arise, the paper [1] provides some guidelines for reviewers, whose role is essential to the publication process.

Unfortunately, the review process is inherently one of conflict of interest. Institutions in many cultures recognize the dangers of conflict of interest, and clear instances, such as nepotism, are legally and socially forbidden. Scholarly publication, however, can only proceed by seeking the assistance of experts who may be either competitors or collaborators of the submitting authors. Since conflict of interest is unavoidable, it is essential that journals operate under guidelines that ensure objectivity and fairness to the greatest possible extent.

With these concerns in mind, the purpose of this note is to suggest guidelines for review practice. In some cases these suggestions merely articulate what is common, although not necessarily universal, practice. In other cases, these suggestions are radical and undoubtedly will be controversial; however, to me, all of these suggestions reflect common sense and fair play.

These suggestions should not be viewed as concrete proposals for change; rather, they are merely intended to promote open discussion and constructive dialogue on issues that are of utmost importance to the scholarly community.

The present note complements [1]. In particular, [1] discusses the responsibilities of reviewers, while the current paper focuses on the responsibilities of editors.

Some Suggestions

Authors must be allowed to submit anonymously.

The suitability of a manuscript for publication must be based on an objective evaluation of its contents. The name, rank, affiliation, prior accomplishments (or failures), nationality, gender, ethnic origin, hair color, etc., of the authors must play no role in the review process. Some journals permit blind reviewing ([2,3]), although the identity of authors can easily be discerned in specialized areas of research. In addition, an author can deliberately make his or her identity known through the text or reference list of the paper. However, since each paper must be judged solely on the merit of its content, the identity of the authors is of no relevance. Consequently, any authors who wish to protect their anonymity must be allowed to do so.

One potential difficulty with anonymity is perceived plagiarism. A reviewer may notice that verbiage in a manuscript is identical to verbiage in a published paper. If the author list of the published paper overlaps the author list of the manuscript, however, there is no problem. The editor can settle such issues with minimal effort.

Editors must seek permission before sending manuscripts to reviewers.

Reviewers are bound by an agreement of confidentiality concerning the contents of a manuscript. Yet, editors often send manuscripts to reviewers without the consent of the reviewer. The reviewer who receives the paper is placed in a potentially difficult position, namely, s/he is obligated to respect the confidentiality of a manuscript that they have not asked to see.

Some editors query potential reviewers before sending the paper to them for review. This practice has at least two principal merits: The editor confirms that the reviewer is appropriate for the paper, and the editor receives assurance from the reviewer that they will cooperate in completing a timely review. The editor may seek such consent by sending the reviewer a brief description of the paper, or perhaps the title and abstract. This is easily accomplished via email.

However, the editor should not send the entire contents of the paper to a potential reviewer without prior consent since doing so unilaterally forces the reviewer to respect confidentiality of a manuscript. An unpublished manuscript is proprietary material and thus it should not be transmitted indiscriminately. If a potential reviewer is working on related research with imminent plans for submission, s/he may not want to be placed in the position of reviewing a competing manuscript. Editors have a responsibility to respect a potential reviewer's desire to avoid such conflicts.

Reviews that are not based on objectivity must be discarded.

While the role of the reviewer is to give an opinion on the suitability of a paper for publication, this opinion must be based on objective criteria to the greatest possible extent. This is not a universally accepted practice; some editors insist that the opinion of expert reviewers must hold sway even without substantiation. If a reviewer judges a paper to be of poor quality, s/he must give specific examples to substantiate that opinion. If the reviewer judges the contents of a manuscript to be insignificant, then s/he is obligated to demonstrate why that is the case. A review that says nothing more than "not interesting" or "not surprising" is a non-review; it has no validity and should be discarded without being transmitted to the authors. Reviews that fail to provide an objective basis for their evaluation have no merit and can have no bearing on a publication decision.

Journals must guarantee timeliness.

Timeliness is essential to publication since priority is critical to the research process. Therefore journals, whose reason for existence is the publication of the work of researchers, have an obligation to publish in a timely manner. The time to return reviews to authors must be guaranteed by the journal.

Sometimes a manuscript is not suitable for a journal for topical reasons. Such decisions are the responsibility of the editor, and should be rendered within a few weeks without exception.

A guarantee of timely publication undoubtedly raises serious problems for editors who rely on the assistance of volunteer reviewers. Yet, this difficulty does not absolve the journal of its obligation to evaluate submitted manuscripts in a timely manner. A reviewer who does not respond to a request for reviews in a timely manner loses the opportunity to comment on the paper. Likewise, an editor who obtains reviews but fails to render a decision in a timely manner provides a disservice, if not irreparable harm, to the authors.

Should the editor be unable to obtain reviews or render a decision in the guaranteed time period (noted by the journal in its submission rules), then the paper must be published as is and without exception. Not doing so devalues the authors' work and represents a failure of the journal's review process.

Conclusions

These suggestions on editorial practice and responsibility entail an increased burden on editors, who are largely volunteer. Yet the intent of these suggestions is to emphasize that scholarly journals

have an obligation to respect and practice basic tenets of fairness to submitting authors. A journal is very much a public institution inasmuch as there are no prior constraints on who may submit a manuscript. While inconvenient, these suggestions reflect simple common sense, which must underlie the activities of this important institution of the scholarly tradition. Although we cannot clean up voting in Florida, we can seek to minimize the imperfections in our own institutions.

References

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