


**AUTHOR:**Johann Tempelhoff **AFFILIATION:**

¹Research Group for the Cultural Dynamics of Water in Southern Africa, School of Basic Sciences, Vaal Triangle Faculty, North-West University, Vanderbijlpark, South Africa

CORRESPONDENCE TO:

Johann Tempelhoff

EMAIL:

johann.tempelhoff@nwu.ac.za

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Peer review in academic journals: A Pandora's box

A recent open webinar – a regular public digital platform for academics to communicate in the time of COVID – hosted by the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) on 31 July dealt with the peer review process of academic journals.

Although it remains something of a Pandora's box at times, peer review is undoubtedly a key component in the rituals of academic publishing. Although often fraught with surprises, conflict, and lively debate, it is peer review that ensures sound quality.¹

Currently, the South African academic publishing industry is in a growth phase. The number of manuscripts submitted is increasing, with many written by a new generation of academics eager to make their mark in their chosen fields of expertise. But alas, many authors encounter obstacles in getting their material beyond the peer-review phase.

For obvious reasons there is considerable interest among academics to find out more about the peer-review process – evident by the over 300 people who registered in advance to attend the digital webinar.

Presenters included Prof. Lucienne Abrahams of the University of the Witwatersrand and editor of *The African Journal of Information and Communication*; Dr Salmira Mokgehele, a researcher at the Agricultural Research Council and Associate Editor Mentee at the *South African Journal of Science* (SAJS); Prof. MP Sebola, a widely published local and international academic in the field of management sciences at the University of Limpopo; and Dr Andy Carolin, a senior lecturer at the University of Johannesburg and a regular peer reviewer in the fields of English literature, gender and cultural studies.

Abrahams, who facilitated the proceedings, stressed in her opening statement that creativity is important. An innovative piece of writing that is informative and beyond the run-of-the-mill type of material often gets published. Her advice to prospective authors was to gain insight into research methodology and writing skills in areas of investigation beyond their own fields of specialisation. She made the point that by collaborating in research groups, authors are exposed to valuable, innovative ideas which they can then apply in their own research and reporting.

Panelists were well aware of the typical problem authors have with 'exclusivist' and 'closed shop' journal peer reviews and speakers acknowledged that specific approaches and/or trends are pervasive in some disciplines and that this could lead to journals losing contributions from a new generation of academic writers.

Carolin acknowledged that the role of the peer reviewer is pivotal because many reviews operate in a contested field. There would be diverse views and reviewers might well lack consensus on an article. Editors would then be obliged to find an additional reviewer. However, more often than not, the journal's editor would have to step in to make the ultimate decision on the material in question.

Reviewers, Carolin told the participants, are, after all, ordinary people. They are fallible. Their only advantage over the next reviewer is their specific field of knowledge. If a reviewer shows the correct attitude, a sensible assessment of a manuscript can be reached. Carolin's classification of peer reviewers included the 'monster' (the one who obstructs output); the gatekeeper (guarding the disciplinary domain in a dogmatic mode of thinking); and the 'desirable peer reviewer' who fits into the role of becoming an indirect contributor by making constructive suggestions on a manuscript. It is this latter attitude that contributes to a process of meaningful knowledge production.

There is no place for bad scholarship in the publishing realm. At the same time, there must be a sense of generosity towards the author, as well as to the peer reviewer. According to Carolin, it is sound, sensible editorial management that secures appropriate reviewers.

Sebola, an experienced and much-published academic author, explained that it remains difficult to understand why a local journal would decline his work, while the same material sails through peer reviews of highly respected international journals. His advice was for authors to carefully identify the appropriate type of journal for the material an author may have on offer. South Africa is currently moving into a phase of significant postgraduate research output, according to Sebola, and this new generation of academics is eager to make its mark.

On the editorial side, the SAJS has introduced an Associate Editor Mentorship Programme. Mokgehele explained that appropriate mentoring has given her the opportunity to communicate with authors of highly promising manuscripts and allowed her to engage in a systematic phase of coaching in writing and editing.

From the discussion, it was evident that the SAJS strategy has merit. When promising young academics are brought into the editorial management system, they come from new networks and have fresh insight into emerging fields of knowledge. Given the appropriate editorial mentoring, the mentee can make a substantial contribution to the further absorption of, for example, indigenous African knowledge systems in creative academic writing. Increasingly, younger editorial members are becoming familiar with current local and international trends in numerous fields of research.

From Mokgehele's discussion, it was evident that SAJS's young editorial members soon became familiar with the phenomenon of a range of views shared by reviewers. The best approach, it seems, is to secure a review from the right expert in the specific field and to make sure that the material is compliant with the guidelines of the journal.

As mentioned, South Africa is currently on the cusp of a higher production rate of completed postgraduate studies that should naturally correspond to an increasing rate of published articles. However, participants in the webinar



discussion pointed out that the postgraduate output did not always lead to reporting in academic journals. Both the panellists and participants argued that academics have busy schedules. Apart from teaching they also have their own research and pressing administrative tasks, along with the customary load of postgraduate students. They do not always have the time to provide additional guidance on the manuscripts that arrive on their desks to review.

On the editorial side, it appears that the ever-present problem is the inability to have enough, or the right type of, peer reviewers. The speakers as well as the webinar participants favoured suggestions that peer reviewing academics should get recognition from their managers for the time and effort spent on peer reviews and for serving on journal editorial boards. Peer reviewing should feature in their performance management assessments.

In fact, Abrahams was of the view that peer-reviewing responsibilities should be taken into consideration when promotions are made. Furthermore, ratings institutions such as the National Research Foundation of South Africa should take note of editorial services rendered by academics.

In some quarters there were calls for peer reviewers being paid for doing reviews. However, during the open discussion, there was consensus that the peer review should be seen as a free service rendered by individual academics who could be relied on to make sound judgements as a community service to other experts.

There were questions about young academics submitting material with, or without, the support of their postgraduate study leaders. Some speakers hinted that study leaders were not always supportive of article writing. One editor insisted that study leaders should play a more supportive role in the guidance of their students, especially in the field of academic publishing. With study leaders typically taking charge of mentoring the student from the writing phase to the final manuscript submission, the success rate of the manuscript could increase significantly.

The elephant in the room remained a sense of cynicism about the fact that material submitted seldom reached the phase beyond a first peer-review round.

According to Sebola, the Association of Commonwealth Universities and the management of South Africa's universities are well aware of the value of next generation scholarship. He stressed the point that editors of journals need to facilitate the process of absorption and growth. Personally, he favoured the arrangement that the approval of an article would not be the exclusive, privileged domain of the editor. It had to be a collective editorial decision.

Moreover, there had to be more opportunities for authors to learn from the peer-review process. Reviewers, Sebola pointed out, need to provide detailed expositions of what needed to be done to improve the quality of a manuscript.

Participants in the open discussion agreed that editors and reviewers working with large numbers of manuscripts, seldom had the time to give detailed and ongoing support on the editorial content of articles. It was felt that the responsibility had to be shared by the author and postgraduate study leader. The study leader was perhaps in the best position to do valuable coaching.

Some good ideas were discussed. There were suggestions of using Publons (a commercial website that provides a free service for academics to track, verify, and showcase their peer review and editorial contributions for academic journals).² Also thought provoking was the question: Who does the young academic go to for support when doing a first peer review for a journal? Much can be said for a future author as reviewer, equipped with some basic postgraduate skills on reviewing practices.

Owing to time constraints, discussion leaders were unable to make disclosures about the complex process of digital publication in today's virtual academic journal editorial office. In recent years, thanks to digital technologies, the publishing process has sped up. Gone are the days when manuscripts, typed or handwritten, and sent in hard copy and by registered mail, would be subject to typesetting and proofreading before being published.

Nowadays, publishing is fast, complex and multi-faceted. Many processes happen simultaneously. Manuscripts are subjected to digital similarity checks to prevent plagiarism. Algorithms monitor the impact of published texts. The quantitative measure has replaced many uncertainties of the qualitative processes of former times.

However, peer review, it seems, remains of crucial importance in successful publications. It is the task of the editor, or members of an editorial team, to draw a distinction between the good, the bad, and the 'rude' peer review. The editorial team has to consider the reviews from the perspective of an academic commitment that speaks to integrity and ethics.³ Reviewers who are disrespectful to authors, be they young academics or old-fashioned veterans, should not feature prominently on the name lists of good journals.

Any experienced journal editor would concede that a careful manuscript is more likely to go all the way to publication than a shoddily written text. Manuscripts that make the grade are usually those that have been read first by an experienced and trusted colleague, before being passed on to a skilled language editor and submitted with the greatest respect for the editorial guidelines of the identified journal. After all, there is pride at stake in a good piece of writing. Few authors favour publishing their work anonymously.⁴ A neat article speaks of self-pride.

Even academic journals themselves are subject to internal and external oversight and peer review. Reviews by ratings entities determine their status. Editorial board members tend to be large in number and they work in close collaboration with technology systems administrators. Nowadays globalisation also plays an important role. The peer review of a good, local-content article often reaches the desktop of an expert reviewer in a foreign country.

Editors, confident of their submitted material, take pride in sharing local work of outstanding quality with colleagues elsewhere. In the field of natural science, peer review is said to be the critical objective way of ensuring that there is transparency and trust in the findings that are shared by a number of specialists in a particular field.⁵ This is also the view upheld in the social sciences and humanities.

Peer review, although somewhat of a Pandora's box for many authors and editors, is, however, bound to remain a much appreciated and respected element of academic publishing.

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