



Who (and where) are the peer reviewers?

This month we once again celebrated global Peer Review Week (19–23 September 2022), during which our journal, along with many others, participated in activities to draw attention to the importance of, and to improve the practice of, peer review. On an everyday basis, peer review is satirised and pilloried – the Facebook group called ‘Reviewer 2 must be stopped!’ has over 97 000 members. Put the words ‘peer review cartoon’ into an Internet search and you will find image after image of mean, ignorant, and self-serving reviewers out to block the legitimate aspirations of researchers.

On a more mundane but no less telling level, there can be few readers of our journal who have not had the experience of waiting far longer than they would wish for journals (including ours) to get back to them with peer review comments. Readers who are themselves in editorial roles will also be familiar with the ubiquitous behind-the-scenes scramble to find peer reviewers. As an editor, I have on occasion had to approach more than 30 academic colleagues to receive, eventually, two short peer reviews. Scientific journals field many legitimate queries from authors about the fate of papers they submitted months ago; as an editor I share the frustrations of authors about the time it takes. As an author myself, I become aggrieved and impatient when waiting to hear whether my submission will have a chance at being published.

Having been involved in academic publishing as an author for 40 years, and in an editorial capacity for about 30 years, I have the impression that things are getting worse. I know this impression is shared by colleagues who are editors – it seems that year by year it is getting more and more difficult to get reviews in; the COVID situation over the past few years has not, it seems, helped matters. I am aware as I make these claims that I do not have evidence for them, and that there are numerous studies in scientometrics which explore empirically a range of issues including secular shifts in peer review turnaround times. And though of course it is the case that authors and editors alike may be biased to focus on cases where there have been long delays (just as I have done here), the discomfort is clear. Delays on the part of peer reviewers are at times informally framed in moralistic terms, such as ‘It is wrong to keep authors waiting’, or ‘If you are not going to do a review properly and quickly, say so at the outset rather than keeping the journal and the author waiting.’ There is merit to these injunctions, but though I sometimes say such things about reviewers, I have myself delayed and let journals down more times than I feel comfortable admitting. The pressure on academics, especially in our African context, feels unrelenting.

If I do not have the evidence to know whether there is an actual crisis in peer review, I can say that there is certainly a felt one, and I have had excellent colleagues say to me that they will not take on editorial roles at academic journals chiefly because they do not wish to spend their time chasing peer reviewers. Yet, we know of no better system. In my editorial capacity, indeed, I see the enormously helpful and constructive role that good peer review plays. Unnamed, unpaid peer reviewers have at times played crucial roles in how I have developed my own academic thinking. Peer reviewers can be and often are our most helpful teachers, and the vast majority of peer review reports that I see are constructive and helpful, even when reviewers are very critical of authors’ work. In

many ways it is true to say that a journal’s reputation rests partly on the hidden labour of peer reviewers. At our journal, certainly, we are beholden to our reviewers and very grateful to them.

The idea of peer review, though, depends on a notion of ‘peers’ which is complex and open to contestation. There are two key ways in which the idea of the ‘peer’ affects our journal in particular. First, we are deliberately a multidisciplinary journal. Scholars from different disciplines, all of whom may have useful contributions to make in terms of how we address large and complex challenges, may have radically different ideas as to how researchers should engage with complex problems. A journal like ours requires both authors and reviewers (along with the editorial team) to imagine how their own scholarship may be viewed, understood, and, indeed misunderstood, by people from different assumptive worlds. We have to write, review, and edit bearing in mind that the broad community of scholars who use our journal, though in an important sense a community of peers, is also heterogeneous. This heterogeneity is fundamental to the vitality of a vibrant science community, provided all parties recognise that there are many ways to think about and research and write about the world. A second way in which the idea of a ‘peer’ is complex for our journal relates to the history of the academy in our context and to the changes and struggles of the unfolding present. There are different views on the impact of markers of identity on scientific practice, but scientometric studies of peer review have shown clearly that perceived scientific status of authors, when these are known to reviewers or editors, may affect peer review and acceptance rate outcomes (see for example a recent working paper¹). Historically, the practice of science in Africa (and elsewhere) has been intertwined with histories of colonialism and conquest, with all the markers of race, gender, class, age and seniority that go along with these histories.² Though there will be disciplinary and ideological differences among our readers as to the importance of identity markers for determining beliefs about scholarship quality, there can be no doubt that the future of the academy should and will look different from its past in terms of identity markers.

We are grateful to all those who review for us. We would also like to broaden and diversify our reviewer pool. When asked to review, please agree to do so, please do so timeously, and please also think of how to involve others such as graduate students and postdoctoral fellows in the review process (please do ask the editor if you wish to do this as we have to protect the anonymity and integrity of the review process). Please volunteer to review, and if you are approached and feel out of your depth, please (again with the editor’s explicit agreement) ask that a co-reviewer you respect may join the review process. Please help us, however challenging it may be, to continue growing and developing peer review.

References

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