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# Peer review is academic citizenship

Academic work has a rapidly increasing half-life while the half-life of academics is becoming a serious problem. As the Editor of *Visual Anthropology,* a very active retiree, recently wrote to the editorial board, on which I serve:

> *Dear Colleagues,*
>
> *… Universities are expecting people to perform or perish … What it means for reviewing is that you Editors might get your best results by pursuing senior or retired experts who are no longer concerned with chalking up points; alternatively, you may have some luck with graduate students, who also may be very up to date on the literatures.*

Globally, academics are wilting under 60–80-hour working weeks, and, not surprisingly, dying prematurely, falling ill or retiring early. Besides, are retirees really still abreast of the current literature?

Some of South Africa's 323 journals are merely aggregators of under-evaluated articles that fill space and enable universities to milk the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) incentive. Relentlessly harassed by performance management contracts, even senior academics are submitting half-digested, poorly written, badly referenced and flawed work, and then wondering why competent reviewers respond harshly.

Three categories of reviewer are identified by Ndukuyakhe Ndlovu: (1) the non-responsive; (2) those who never deliver; and of those who do, (3) a failure sometimes to engage with the paper meaningfully.[1] Then there is (4) the report that is calculated to humiliate; and in rare instances, (5) the assessment is designed – no matter the study's potential and relevance – to sink it without trace. Nothing is gained under any of these scenarios.

In contrast, fastidious reviewers and editors are now spending so much time and effort playing the roles of advisor, copy editor, referencing and fact checker that some characterise themselves as para-authors. After all, they are the unsung ones who have rendered publishable initially unpublishable submissions. Yet, the extensive work invested is occasionally seen as obstruction. In one case pertaining to the journal which I edit, a reviewer unselfishly familiarised herself with an obscure topic, generating over 2 days a very helpful two-page report. But the author had just withdrawn the article because of the 'delay'; then requested the report, but did not relay thanks for the time, investment and expertise that the reviewer had expended. For such authors, editors are simply postmasters, and peer reviewers are a time-consuming nuisance.

The epidemic of recent article retractions – especially in the sciences – is indicative of the push to publish prematurely. But few actually perish in the age when evidence, cross-referencing and accuracy are low on the agenda. This is not necessarily fake science but potentially good science managed badly. So bad has it become that a former president of the British Science Association mischievously suggested limiting each academic to but one article annually.[2] This approach would bankrupt South African universities, given their dependence on the well-intentioned DHET publication incentive.

The push to publish is felt by students also. As one told me:

> *Young academics, such as myself, are slowly losing interest in producing high-impact research because the road to an advanced degree is driven by shortcuts and an obvious push by our professors to sacrifice quality and simply produce, produce, produce ... My point is: instead of complaining about how creaky the system is, since we ARE the system, should we not be engaging in constructive dialogues directed at changing the system and making it work for us instead of against us?*

Fortunately, the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf), the National Research Foundation and DHET constitute the national infrastructure of the system. Quality (not quantity), increased research capacity (not depletion through exhaustion) and global competitiveness (not parochial myopia) are the driving criteria of these institutions. These laudable objectives have, however, become lost in the administration of research and institutional need to ensure the bottom line. Peer reviewing is an absent category on performance management templates, even as a form of community engagement unless emphasised by the form-filler.

The exemplar held up by ASSAf's journal evaluation panels is the *South African Journal of Science,* with its full research studies, and its shorter research letters, and front-section commentaries, book reviews and news items. These latter sections are highly read, and sometimes calculatedly controversial, but they are not counted in performance management or DHET annual returns. In other words, there is no 'return' for authors and universities for anything but the discrete incentive-earning article, whether or not it is read, cited or impactful. It is in the commentaries and review essays, however, that the fruitful debates often occur, and which draw the highest citations.

Voluntary editors and peer reviewers are the unpaid cash cows enabling impatient South African university-affiliated authors to feed the subsidy millions into their universities and onward to themselves, depending on internal disbursement policies. That is the institutional upside. The downside is that editors labour after hours, with little or no recognition from many of the institutions that employ them.[3] Are editors just gatekeeping cogs? 'Just write', might be the auditor's instruction; do not edit, do not peer review, do not engage your peers through commentary, book reviews or research letters. Only production-line products – 'accredited' of course – will qualify for research incentives and institutional recognition.

Peer reviewing is not gatekeeping, peremptorily preventing publication or incentive earning. Rather, reviewers are skilled advisors who, while possibly rejecting an article, can be nevertheless helpful for enabling revisions. We

are all learners and should treat each other as such. Moral panics of the kind unleashed from Nicoli Natrass's Commentary[4] may have their place within the non-academic commons, but such ad hominem accusatory responses themselves require rigorous critical discourse analysis – what can be learned from them in terms of ideological positioning? All parties to this debate need to consider that reaching the 'ultimate opinion', to use Peirce's[5] term, involves making sense via a process of semiotic reasoning, and analysing how one came to one's interpretations. [See SAJS Vol 116 Special Issue for debates on Nattrass's Commentary.]

The flip side is: does the author respond appropriately? On occasion, the exact same draft that I rejected for Journal A, notwithstanding the helpful comments offered, is submitted to Journal B, and again finds its way to me to review, and again with regard to Journal C, which identifies me as a reviewer also. Eventually, this unrevised article will be published in Journal Non-entity, also 'accredited'. And, hiding in plain sight, is the very high continuing incidence of plagiarism within the 17 South African management journals.[6] That no outcry has occurred in this recurring instance is an indicator of a catastrophic failure of peer review and disciplinary and institutional accountability, with attendant costs to the Treasury.

'How-to-get-published workshops' should be complemented with training in peer review. The 'yin' cannot work without the 'yang'. Also, in the age of big copyrighted data, reviewers should additionally be able to scrutinise the data bases on which studies are predicated and be privy to source codes of customised software.[7]

The best reviewers are those who (1) critically read and constructively engage the submission; (2) offer helpful comments to enable the author to improve the study; (3) refer authors to cognate studies that would strengthen (or contest) their own arguments and findings in a holistic mapping of the topic; and (4) submit reports on time, especially given the half-life of knowledge. Finally, (5) peer review assists in the much vaunted objective of 'de-colonisation'.[8] As Ndlovu[1] observes, when African-based scholars evade peer reviewing duties, editors have to rely on their overseas colleagues who may be insufficiently familiar with local contexts.

Some South African authors are mystified and resentful when engaging in extended dialogue with editors, reviewers and copy editors, sometimes over many drafts, over many months. Such collaboration is part of the process, and on occasion I read sentences that I wrote in a report now being used verbatim by an author without attribution to the anonymous reviewer! Thus, do peer reviewers or para-authors voluntarily cede their intellectual property to someone else who cannot acknowledge reviewer generosity where a blunt blind procedure is applied.

Another bugbear is when an article is published exactly as first submitted notwithstanding extensive reviewer reports and recommendations. The question arises: did the editor pass the report onto the author or not? If not, why not, and why expose the now published author in a vulnerable situation? Or, totally contradictory reports are passed on to authors with a mere request that the criticisms simply be addressed.

Preprints became the order of the day during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, in the rush to out-Trump Trump's Fox TV-led fake science, pseudo-pharmacology and rhetorical statistical denialism, impatient scientists risked adding to the retraction factor. South Africa, especially, has a wretched history of promoting sham reasoning and dodging peer review as occurred during the era of HIV/Aids denialism. When evaluation protocols are evaded, uncontrolled medical experimentation results, making nonsense of ethical criteria and public health, not to mention scientific validity. The dilemma: fast-breaking information is needed when health emergencies arise. In such cases, peer review generates 'a rapid-results process', and most COVID-19 preprint websites did institute 'appropriate systems' (with thanks to public health communication specialist Warren Parker for this observation). In contrast, thanks to opportunistic COVID-19 Trumpian politicisation, the Chinese introduced party political review, in addition to peer review.

Peer review is not perfect, but it offers the best current practice. When we fail our peer-reviewing duties, we fail ourselves, our disciplines, our institutions and the public. When university managements fail to acknowledge the fundamental value of peer review, they imperil science, and conceptual and methodological progress.

For ASSAf, an article attains value when it factors *readers* and social usefulness of research into the national equation. Its National Scholarly Editors' Forum (NSEF) regularly debates different models of peer review and places social value – rather than just the product and metrics – as a key objective of academic citizenship. Debate on academic research practice is encouraged at NSEF meetings that bring editors together from the public, private and university sectors. Journal editing, peer review and academic citizenship ensures a holistic and community-oriented approach to our work where agreed rules of engagement are followed. The Nattrass affair has reinstalled commentaries back on the debating agenda, DHET disincentives notwithstanding. Peer review is a fundamental communal practice of critical academic citizenship, and it contributes towards improving science for public benefit. It should not be an unrecognised add-on done in one's spare time. But for academic auditors, peer review is not itself an income-earning activity. There's the rub.

We all need to do peer review, properly. Our half-life will otherwise be fruitless. Getting published is just one component of academic citizenship – one that cannot function without review procedures. But the practice should never be reduced to box ticking. For retirees, reviewing keeps them intellectually active. For science, peer review is the fuel that drives the system. For authors, peer review is quality control, and for readers, the practice is an assurance of reasonable validity. For the public, peer review, especially in the medical sciences, could be the difference between life and death.

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