# Editorial: Open reviewing

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When I was a post-graduate student at Imperial College London, one of the highlights of the week was the research seminar. As its name suggests, this was a meeting of the research students to provide a forum for the exchange of ideas and, crucially, for the critical examination of any reports or papers that we were in the process of writing. It was an unspoken rule that nothing could be submitted for publication until it had passed the internal review of the research seminar. Although it was often frustrating for the authors, it had the desired effect of sharpening the arguments, exposing any inadequacies in the analysis, improving the readability. It almost guaranteed that, when the article was submitted to a scholarly journal, it would be accepted with only minor revisions. The hard work had already been done in the research seminar.

Fifty years have passed and I sense that less attention is now given to this open, internal peer review. Many of the submissions I see, to *Education & Self Development* and other journals for whom I review, have significant failings that would have been detected and corrected if they had been discussed and honed in such a forum. The pressures of academic life have resulted in a more streamlined and less demanding process. We all tend to write in greater isolation and are less inclined to show our work to others before its formal publication. Increasing competition among researchers is partly to blame for this, but there is also a cultural shift and perhaps an arrogance about the quality of our own work. Of course, we share with our co-authors, but they are often too close to the work to be truly objective. We have moved to a more closed system of peer review.

So, the first time that our paper meets reality is when it is submitted to publication and we get to read the comments made by the reviewers. Which would you rather have: the critical comments of your friendly colleagues, or comments from anonymous reviewers who hold your publishing future in their hands?

The concept of peer review goes back to the 9th Century. In his book *Ethics of the Physician* Ishāq ibn Alī al-Ruhāwī documents a process where the notes of a practising Islamic physician were reviewed by peers and the physician could face a lawsuit from a maltreated patient if the reviews were negative (Speer, 2002). Eight hundred years later, Henry Oldenburg (my favourite editor) who founded *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* employed editorial pre-publication peer-review, and since that time it has been an accepted process for ensuring quality and accuracy in the published academic record.

The majority of 'quality' journals currently use a form of blind review: either double blind where the author does not know the identity of the reviewers and the reviewers do not know the identity of the author, or single blind where reviewers know the identity of authors, but the authors do not know the identity of reviewers. The process has a number of advantages. If the reviewers do not know the authors' identities then they should not be susceptible to bias (either in favour of respected authors, or against those that they dislike); if the author does not know who has reviewed their work, there is no risk of subsequent retribution for a critical review. However, it is also open criticism that it lacks transpar-

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ency. If, as is usually the case, everyone is required to keep the comments confidential, then how would those outside the process know that it has been carried out properly? Who (outside the editorial team) would know which reviewers had commented on a specific article? Were they competent to review articles on that subject? Were they good at their work? And how would their contribution to scholarship be recognised? Traditional peer reviewed journals rely on the credibility of their editorial team – and particularly the editors – to establish the trust of their readers. If something is published in a 'quality' journal then another researcher can trust that it has been competently reviewed, and is probably accurate (no editor can totally guarantee that inaccuracies will never appear in print!).

Various alternative models of peer review have been proposed and implemented in recent years. If we place double blind peer review at one end of the scale, the far end is similar to a social media site where authors post their articles and invite others to post their comments. This produces a collection of comments in the form of a discussion on the topic which, in a community that conforms to the rules of polite society, can offer a broad spectrum of ideas and arguments. However, if the process is abused, then the comments can become abusive and unhelpful. If anyone can comment, then someone reading the collection is left to make up their own mind about the credibility of the comments. Unless the discussion is carefully moderated it can become a source of fake academic news and abuse. Can other researchers reply on the accuracy of what they read? The simplicity of this approach means that it is a very low-cost way of disseminating research; the corollary is that it encourages the explosive growth of unmoderated material and potentially makes it harder for researchers to find the information they need.

Stepping back from this extreme we find organised online journals that publish all the articles that are submitted, and then encourage readers to submit their own reviews. These are published as moderated comments with each article. One such journal ensures that sensible reviews are forthcoming, by making it a condition that users must post two reviews before they can have an article published. Some editorial control ensures that the articles themselves have some substance and that the reviews are credible and not abusive. All of the participants are identified and readers are left to decide on the quality of the contributions. If the reviewer can be identified then they are less likely to make unjustified criticisms – although it has happened.

The inevitable reality is that academic quality costs money. Established traditional journals invest considerable time and money in ensuring that the review process works correctly, that the published articles are readable and free of typographical errors, and that the references are correct. They also invest heavily in making the published articles discoverable. If there is no easy way of searching for articles that you do not know exist, then it is unlikely that you will ever read them. Issuing DOI numbers (digital object identifiers) for published articles, inclusion in Scopus and other indexing systems, involves costs. The open publication, open review systems described above are easy to set up but are difficult to sustain because they do not have a means of generating money. Why should an author pay for a service that he or she could set up on a Facebook® page?

So, commercial publishers are looking for ways in which they can modify their existing systems to provide greater transparency in the review process. It is not an easy thing to accomplish. It requires a fundamental change in the ways that their online manuscript processing systems work. The package of material (articles and review comments) that must go forward for copy-editing and type-setting is significantly greater. Where there are print copies of the journal, these will cost more. There is also a significant concern over the relationships between the editor, the authors and the reviewers. Reviewers who have signed up to the concept of confidentiality in relation to specific articles may be reluctant to have their identities known. They may decide that their future comments

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should be more bland, thus depriving the editor of good evidence on which to base a publishing decision. On the other hand, reviewers are less likely to return superficial comments or recommendations based on a lack of evidence.

Open reviewing offers a number of advantages but brings with it some significant disadvantages for scholarly publishing. It might be likened to a glamorous film star: lovely to look at but very difficult to live with!

## References

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