

## Now More Than Ever: Reflections on the State and Importance of Peer Review

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The process of peer review is a long-upheld ritual practiced across academic disciplines, intended to enforce standards of scholarship and rigor in what work is reported, and what gets to count as knowledge. As John Saultz noted, peer review is the “epistemological foundation standing between authors and readers of scientific papers.”<sup>1</sup> It is certainly a time-consuming effort on the part of reviewers, and when performed specifically for scholarly journals, it is generally performed without compensation. As a recent study by Anderson and Ledford demonstrated, however, a world without peer review would be harmful; the rapid diffusion of withdrawn or refuted hypotheses infiltrating the social and professional world could have life-and-death implications.<sup>2</sup> The purpose of this editorial is to appeal to each reader with the importance of serving as a peer reviewer.

Before highlighting its virtues, however, let us first frankly acknowledge that peer review is an imperfect process in need of improvement. It is rare that an active scholar or practitioner in a field has spare time to respond to voluntary and unplanned invitations to review manuscripts. Additionally, the peer review process has been criticized from a variety of perspectives over the years,<sup>3,4</sup> for being too obstructionist; for preserving status quo in academia and science, enforcing existing (and fraught) hierarchies and prejudices; for slowing the dissemination of new knowledge and scholarship; and even for being essentially flawed, sometimes allowing deceitful results into final publications. Finally, we must also acknowledge that the traditional peer review process has no immunity to systemic racism and inequality; more must be done to realize greater diversity of perspectives in research, and this includes peer review.

In spite of these flaws, the peer review process offers tremendous benefits, as many have noted.<sup>3-7</sup> To the list of recognized benefits, we add our own observation: the act of reviewing and considering a raw manuscript is instructive to each of us as writers. Considering the work of another in prepublished form affords the opportunity to consider the perspective of the reader—what information is needed, and what is superfluous; what descriptive styles are effective, as opposed to occluding; and so forth. We often tell our learners that one of the best ways of improving their own writing is to critically appraise that of others, and to recognize their own habits and assumptions that produce the same mistakes. Reviewing also pulls the curtain back, if ever so slightly, on the unspoken or emic view of a discipline, replete with implicit meanings understood by veteran practitioners. Participating in peer review helps reveal the culture of the discipline to the observant scholar. In short, your own research experiences will improve if you regularly allow yourself the editorial view of unpublished manuscripts. To gain this beneficial experience, there is no barrier; you need only jump in and do it.

There are also broader duties to the field that transcend the benefit to the individual. From an ethical perspective, it can be argued that the person holding expertise in a field is bound to apply that expertise in the service of the common good. Furthermore, individuals who benefit from publishing peer-reviewed manuscripts should consider their own obligation to reciprocate.

For journal editors, a major challenge is the slow recruitment of voluntary peer reviewers for manuscripts. We face competition as there are constantly new journals coming into existence. Consequently, many in academia face an influx of invitations to serve as reviewers, and editors personally face the same influx from other journals, even as we contribute our own. When it takes a long time for an author to receive a decision on a submitted manuscript, it is frequently the result of a backlog in the reviewer recruitment process. The crisis in peer review is real, but you can help.

In short, there are both practical and philosophical reasons to actively participate in the peer review process when invited. It keeps the journals you read and in which you publish healthy, and the process can be instructive for the reviewer. Active and vigorous peer review keeps the fields in which you work intellectually honest and rigorous, and the act of serving as a reviewer returns the service from which authors have benefitted. Finally, every person who accepts an invitation to review a manuscript, and goes on to submit a high-quality peer review, keeps the peer review process in motion. That is frankly good for all of us.

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