

Editorial *A Primer for Peer Review*

Introduction

Peer review does not have the best reputation for good etiquette. This likely is not news to many. “Ever since I started my career,” writes Eric Schneiderhan,

I have been telling myself that the review process would get better once I “grew up” and became a faculty member. It has not. And I am not alone. In my department, we often swap stories about unbelievably nasty comments from reviewers. It is fun in the sense that everyone can chime in but disheartening when we realize how pervasive this “mean” business really is.¹

From an economic perspective, this is, perhaps, predictable. “Because we economists have learned our micro theory well,” write Christopher Barret and David Mustard,

the services rendered by discussants and referees are therefore predictably slow and of low quality, on average. Since our earthly reward from them is meager, we supply very little labor to these tasks. It is hard to argue with the logic of this position so long as one accepts the specification of the time allocation problem as one of maximizing material reward subject to a time constraint.²

On this view, reviewers are just maximizing utility, after all, and most find little in timely and polite peer reviews.

Add to this the Christian conviction that “all have sinned” (Rom. 3:23) and are tempted to sin, and the problem becomes nearly inevitable. Given the temptation,

anonymity from authors, and relative absence of any significant consequence, the problem is further compounded. “Deindividuation theory holds,” Schneiderhan writes, “that anonymity unlocks the worst in all of us.... In current parlance, when we get a chance to be anonymous, the troll comes out.”³

It is in light of this practice that the editors of the *Journal of Markets & Morality* conceived the idea for this peer-review primer. In the course of research, we have also reevaluated and reaffirmed our policy of double-blind peer review for reasons to be detailed herein. Additionally, certain structural issues enable and can even encourage the poor etiquette in question as well as other issues of quality that have come to our attention. In light of all this, we have added a few procedures with the hope of achieving higher quality reviews, streamlining the review process for everyone involved, and discharging our editorial responsibility with regard to maintaining a cordial and professional academic environment.⁴

The State of Peer Review

The form of peer review that a journal uses—open, single-blind, or double-blind—and the details of the review process are vital aspects of proper peer-review ethics and etiquette, in addition to overall journal quality. As such, high-quality peer review is in the interest of everyone involved—reviewers, authors, and editors. As Nancy McCormack writes with regard to legal publishing,

More than just journal quality is riding on the type of peer review chosen. Researchers’ careers depend on publication and project funding; it is vital, therefore, that a greater accountability in the reviewing process is maintained. Even for reviewers themselves, the issue is important. They need the system to work smoothly, since they give their time for free and receive little credit for their efforts. Most of all, a proper reviewing process is crucial for the advancement of a field so that quality is guaranteed and that unorthodox but valuable work on the fringes of an academic discipline is spotted and published.⁵

The *Journal of Markets & Morality* takes seriously the feedback from peer reviewers, and, like many other journals, the quality of reviews greatly influences, though it does not determine, publishing decisions.⁶

Research into the state of peer review has reaffirmed our policy of double-blind peer review as well as pointed out several areas of concern. Single-blind review tends to favor and therefore attract already accomplished authors.⁷ Controlled for author, article, and journal characteristics, however, David N. Laband and Michael J. Piette note that “estimated citations to papers refereed under a double-blind review process exceed those of papers refereed under a single-blind review

process.”⁸ With regard to quality, they report, “The single-blind review process apparently suffers from a type-I error bias to a greater extent than the double-blind review process.”⁹ Furthermore, single-blind and open peer review may be susceptible to bias against nation of origin, ethnicity, and sex of authors.¹⁰

Nevertheless, double-blind peer review as well as peer review more broadly does have drawbacks. Steven M. Shugan offers perhaps the most salient of criticisms: “An unsettling number of great discoveries have never been published in scholarly journals or were initially rejected.”¹¹ Peer review has not historically prevented the publication of errant research either.¹² In addition to the temptation of poor etiquette under the cover of anonymity, as already noted, peer review has also been criticized for unintended bias, including racial bias.¹³

New Practices and Policies for Improved Peer Review

While the benefits outweigh the risks, the *Journal of Markets & Morality* has instituted policies and practices to avoid these common pitfalls and to improve the quality of peer review.

Several sources emphasize the benefits and necessity of a peer-review form for improved professionalism and quality in the review process.¹⁴ Thus, the *Journal of Markets & Morality* has instituted its own peer-review form, designed to guide reviewers in their task and to encourage more balanced and constructive criticism for authors. In addition to any other comments reviewers may wish to share, all must comment on the positives and negatives of the submission in question, giving a detailed analysis of the sources used and the logic employed. Because the anonymity of the double-blind review process has proved to be a temptation for uncharitable rhetoric in the past, reviewers are given the option of disclosing their names and contact information in order to keep themselves accountable as well as facilitating the opportunity to clarify to authors the nature of the comments that they make.

It is worth remembering that submissions that are sent out for peer review have shown enough merit to be above the editors’ desk or bench rejection—meaning that the editors see significant potential in the article.¹⁵ This ought to temper overly disparaging comments, as to some extent they reflect a reviewer’s assessment of the editors’ judgment as well as an author’s expertise. Likewise, the tone and quality of reviews reflects on the character of the reviewer: “In a few (thankfully) rare cases,” Barret and Mustard note, “otherwise outstanding scholars have become infamous for their shoddy work as referees, doing their professional reputations permanent harm.”¹⁶

One area that affects both authors and reviewers is the length of the peer-review process. The *Journal of Markets & Morality* requests at least two reviews, sometimes more, for each submission. In order to expedite quality reviews, if a reviewer agrees to review an article, his or her review is expected within six weeks. If two or more reviews have been received but some are still outstanding after this time, the submission will be processed based on the reviews received.¹⁷

In addition, we have added several associate editors (see the masthead in this issue) to better coordinate the review process.¹⁸ Thus, while the editor that a reviewer corresponds with may not be the journal's executive editor, the assigned editor will have fewer reviewers to correspond with, allowing for more dedicated and fluid cooperation between reviewers and our editorial staff.

Finally, with regard to etiquette, we commend a “do unto others” policy. As one reviewer noted, “My behavior changed dramatically when I started to ‘referee unto others as I would have them referee unto me.’”¹⁹ Even the most established scholars remember their first submissions as scared graduate students—peer review ought to be seen as an opportunity for mentorship. This is not, of course, an exhortation to recommend accepting submissions that one would otherwise suggest be resubmitted or rejected. Rather, the goal is to maintain a constructive tone in which the substance of comments and criticisms are not overshadowed by a lack of charity.

Conclusion

In the face of the sometimes rather ugly state of peer-review ethics and etiquette, the *Journal of Markets & Morality* has established the policies detailed in the foregoing as an attempt to better steward this small plot of academia we are so privileged to tend. However, the editors cannot do it alone. It requires responsible reviewers who take to heart the opportunity to act in such an essential role as part of the academy's quality control. We ask that our reviewers take this seriously; we do not view this as something small and neither should our readers. Rather, we are grateful for the work—often on top of teaching courses, grading papers, and conducting their own research—that our reviewers continue to do for us, acting as guardians and gatekeepers to the marketplace of ideas.

—Dylan Pahman, Assistant Editor

Notes

1. Eric Schneiderhan, “Why You Gotta Be So Mean?” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 22, 2013, <http://chronicle.com/article/Why-You-Gotta-Be-So-Mean-/140469/>.
2. Christopher Barrett and David B. Mustard, “The Ministry of Referees and Discussants,” *Faith & Economics* 40 (Fall 2002): 26–27.
3. Schneiderhan, “Why You Gotta Be So Mean?” See also Angelina N. Christie, “From Experimental Economics toward Integral Human Rationality,” *Journal of Markets & Morality* 16, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 37–51.
4. On the responsibility of editors in this regard, see Schneiderhan, “Why You Gotta Be So Mean?”; Neha Vora and Tom Boellstorff, “Anatomy of an Article: The Peer-Review Process as Method,” *American Anthropologist* 114, no. 4 (December 2012): 578–83; Steven M. Shugan, “The Editor’s Secrets,” *Marketing Science* 26, no. 5 (September–October 2007): 589–95; and J. Scott Armstrong, “Peer Review for Journals: Evidence on Quality Control, Fairness, and Innovation,” *Science and Engineering Ethics* 3 (1997): 63–84.
5. Nancy McCormack, “Peer Review and Legal Publishing: What Law Librarians Need to Know about Open, Single-Blind, and Double-Blind Reviewing,” *Law Library Journal* 101, no. 1 (March 2009): 67.
6. See Shugan, “The Editor’s Secrets,” 590; and David N. Laband and Michael J. Piette, “Does the ‘Blindness’ of Peer Review Influence Manuscript Selection Efficiency?” *Southern Economic Journal* 60, no. 4 (April 1994): 905.
7. See Laband and Piette, “Does the ‘Blindness’ of Peer Review Influence Manuscript Selection Efficiency?” 903, 906.
8. Laband and Piette, “Does the ‘Blindness’ of Peer Review Influence Manuscript Selection Efficiency?” 903. See also 905:

Our findings indicate that the double-blind review process outperforms the single-blind review process. Specifically, we found that papers with the characteristics of the single-blind reviewed papers in our sample would receive 5.6 percent more logged citations if reviewed double-blind, while papers with the characteristics of the double-blind reviewed papers in our sample would receive nearly 18 percent fewer logged citations if reviewed single-blind.

9. Laband and Piette, “Does the ‘Blindness’ of Peer Review Influence Manuscript Selection Efficiency?” 905.
10. See Andrew J. Oswald, “Can We Test for Bias in Scientific Peer-Review?” IZA DP No. 3665 (August 2008): 4.
11. Shugan, “The Editor’s Secrets,” 589.

12. See Susan Haack, "Peer Review and Publication: Lessons for Lawyers," *Stetson Law Review* 36, no. 3 (Spring 2007): 791–819; and Armstrong, "Peer Review for Journals."
13. See Christine A. Stanley, "When Counter Narratives Meet Master Narratives in the Journal Editorial-Review Process," *Educational Researcher* 36, no. 1 (January/February 2007): 14–24. On bias more broadly, see Haack, "Peer Review and Publication"; and Armstrong, "Peer Review for Journals."
14. See Vora and Boellstorff, "Anatomy of an Article," 578–83; Shugan, "The Editor's Secrets"; Barrett and Mustard, "The Ministry of Referees and Discussants"; and Armstrong, "Peer Review for Journals."
15. See Schneiderhan, "Why You Gotta Be So Mean?"; and Shugan, "The Editor's Secrets," 590.
16. Barrett and Mustard, "The Ministry of Referees and Discussants," 30.
17. This practice comes highly recommended by Shugan. See Shugan, "The Editor's Secrets," 592.
18. Shugan also recommends "area editors" that functionally serve a similar purpose. See Shugan, "The Editor's Secrets," 591.
19. Barrett and Mustard, "The Ministry of Referees and Discussants," 31.

Recommended Reading

- Armstrong, J. Scott. "Peer Review for Journals: Evidence on Quality Control, Fairness, and Innovation." *Science and Engineering Ethics* 3 (1997): 63–84.
- Barrett, Christopher, and David B. Mustard. "The Ministry of Referees and Discussants." *Faith & Economics* 40 (Fall 2002): 26–32.
- Haack, Susan. "Peer Review and Publication: Lessons for Lawyers." *Stetson Law Review* 36, no. 3 (Spring 2007): 791–819.
- Hamermesh, Daniel S. "Facts and Myths about Refereeing." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 8, no. 1 (Winter 1994): 153–63.
- . "The Young Economist's Guide to Professional Etiquette." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 6, no. 1 (Winter 1992): 169–79.
- Hemmings, Brian C., Peter Rushbrook, and Erica Smith. "Academics' Views on Publishing Refereed Works: A Content Analysis." *Higher Education* 54, no. 2 (August 2007): 307–32.
- Laband, David N., and Michael J. Piette. "Does the 'Blindness' of Peer Review Influence Manuscript Selection Efficiency?" *Southern Economic Journal* 60, no. 4 (April 1994): 896–906.
- McCormack, Nancy. "Peer Review and Legal Publishing: What Law Librarians Need to Know about Open, Single-Blind, and Double-Blind Reviewing." *Law Library Journal* 101, no. 1 (March 2009): 59–70.
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- Schneiderhan, Eric. "Why You Gotta Be So Mean?" *Chronicle of Higher Education*. July 22, 2013, <http://chronicle.com/article/Why-You-Gotta-Be-So-Mean-/140469/>.
- Shatz, David. "Is Peer Review Overrated?" *The Monist* 79, no. 4 (October 1996): 536–63.
- Shugan, Steven M. "The Editor's Secrets." *Marketing Science* 26, no. 5 (September–October 2007): 589–95.
- Stanley, Christine A. "When Counter Narratives Meet Master Narratives in the Journal Editorial-Review Process." *Educational Researcher* 36, no. 1 (January/February 2007): 14–24.
- Vora, Neha, and Tom Boellstorff. "Anatomy of an Article: The Peer-Review Process as Method." *American Anthropologist* 114, no. 4 (December 2012): 578–83.