Considering the Peer Review Conundrum

Editorial insights into the frustrations, challenges and flaws within scholarly quality assurance

Dr Gaz J Johnson
Senior Editor, Institute of Advanced Study, University of Warwick
exchangesjournal@warwick.ac.uk
@ExchangesIAS @llordllama

14th Sept 2018
Context

• Senior Editor, Institute of Advanced Study, Warwick
  • Manages operation, development and expansion of Exchanges
  • Oversee international editorial board of early career researchers
  • Research interests political economy & power-relations within OA scholarly communication

• **Exchanges: The Interdisciplinary Research Journal**
  • Peer-reviewed, OA, interdisciplinary, scholar-led title targeting multidisciplinary audience
  • Founded 2013, initially attracting Warwick PGR/ECR
  • Publishes original, ideally interdisciplinary, *primarily ECRs* scholarship from any discipline
  • **All submissions in-scope** and meeting scholarly quality criteria accepted for publication
Reviewers & Editors: An Essential Dyad

• Reviewers help ensure publications are **authentic, worthy & original**
  • Crucial because editors are rarely as familiar with field as reviewers
  • Not only reviewing intellectual content, also consider submission’s **ethics & validity**

• Reviewers advise, although **final decision** lies with journal editor
  • Reviewers recommend publish, request revisions or decline
  • May be additional review rounds, if substantive revisions requested
  • Multiple reviewers used (we usually use 2) to accommodate **contrasting viewpoints**

• Editor’s collates anonymised reviewer feedback for authors
  • Filter, emphasise, contextualise & amplifies accordingly
  • Critique not criticism essential to avoid disenfranchising new authors’ voices
Plagiarism & Originality

• **Protect title’s esteem capital** through only disseminating original work
  • ‘presenting someone else’s work or ideas as your own, with or without their consent, by incorporating it into your work without full acknowledgement’ (Oxford, 2018)
  • Submissions **not usually previously published** (*Inglefinger Rule*): some exceptions for non-English works

• **Automatic screening** isn’t infallible & editorial knowledge insufficient
  • Reviewer scrutiny of prior literature and professional scholarly knowledge crucial
  • Keen eye for unsupported statements, attribution-free quotes or prose style divergences

• Inadvertent plagiarism (can be) common ECRs ‘error’
  • **Authorial error?** E.g. quotation without citation or phrasing so familiar blind to its inclusion
  • **Self-plagiarism?** E.g. overtly using substantial prior published own work
Academic Fraud & Intellectual Validity

• **Fraud** attempts to subvert academy’s professional quality standards
  - UK & Global problem (Blackstock, 2018) and can be difficult to detect

• **Academic validity** establishes if research is epistemologically ‘robust’
  - Methodological frameworks & theoretical basis supporting conclusions examined
  - Reviewers examine submissions in context of prior discourse and literature

• Both can be evidenced in empirical (experimental) and/or theoretical work
  - Quantitative work requires checking data/formulae/calculations etc.,
  - Scrutinising qualitative work challenging due to data volume & interpretive stances
Ethical Considerations

• Consider ethical conduct in methods (especially human or animal subject work)
• Research usually passes institutional ethical approval processes
  • Transnational concerns if work carried out in regions with ‘less robust’ ethical practices
  • Reviewers bring disciplinary normative practices & expectations to their critique
  • Challenges in suppressing ‘valuable’ work conducted outside normative frameworks
• Reviewers must conform to personal ethical standards & journal expectations
  • COPE Guidelines an essential read!
  • Double-blind peer review means confidential & anonymous reviews
  • **Intellectual critique**, not overt criticism or *ad hominem* diatribe
Overcoming Bias

- Considerations around **bias, both conscious and unconscious**.
  - Reviewers recognise & embrace own subjectivity within their reviews
  - **Conflict of interest** can invalidate reviewers if personal interests clash
  - Not always practical in small field to replace reviewers

- Politics & ideological issues also challenge for engaging peer reviewers.
  - Many titles ask reviewers to flag issues & provide precis of article
  - Highlights for editor light in which review should be considered

- **Bias against heterodox** risks suppressing/stagnating discourse
  - Multiple reviewers provide greater opinion balance, diminishing ideological obstacles
  - Editorial power to spike/advance research can skew review process outcome
Intellectual Labour: Exploiting or Contributing?

• Peer review part of scholar’s *immaterial labour* global academy contribution
  • Academic publishing praxis predicated upon ‘free-labour’ exploitation

• Reviewers not normally incentivised or contractually obliged to contribute
  • Less tangible benefits: exposure to new thought, satisfaction in shaping discourse
  • Arguable introduction of capital reward distorts field relationships
  • Recognise & reward contribution without invalidating ethics or introducing bias?

• Editors have a key part in recognising contribution & tackling laggards
  • Reviewer contribution to scholar-led, non-profits essential
  • Limited reviewer pool, must ensure broad representation of views, voices and insights
Concluding Thoughts

• Peer review not perfect, but maintaining an effective quality assurance regime critical in validating scholarship

• Essential component to increase titles’ prestige, value, readership & recognition (doubly crucial for scholar-led titles!)

• Plagiarism & intellectual validity most common issues reviewers tackle, but ethics & bias concerns do exist

• Reviewers intellectual labour contribution is valued, but not directly rewarded

• COPE Guidelines are an essential read

Reviewer Registration: exchanges.warwick.ac.uk/user/register
Contact Details

Dr Gaz J Johnson
exchangesjournal@warwick.ac.uk
Senior Editor, Institute of Advanced Study, Millburn House,
University of Warwick Science Park, UK

exchanges.warwick.ac.uk blogs.warwick.ac.uk/exchangesias
@ExchangesIAS @LlordLlama
References (Credit, where it’s due!)


