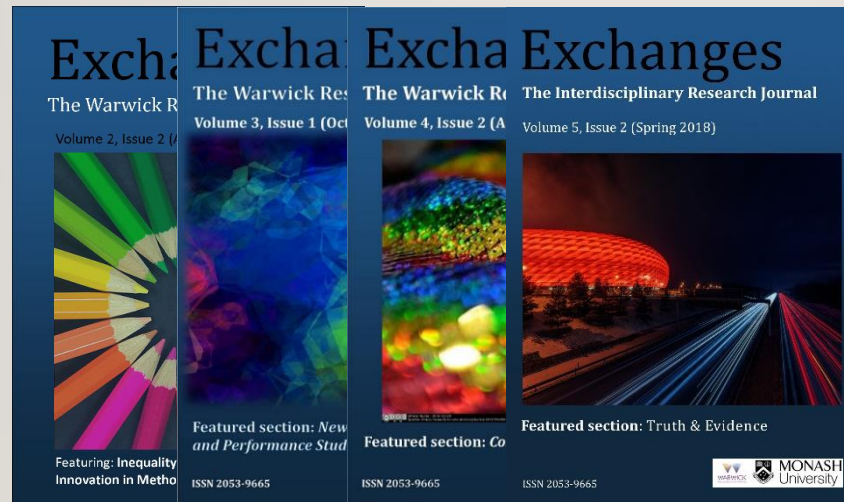


Considering the Peer Review Conundrum

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



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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

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