Overburdened reviewers and the future of peer review

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When journal editors get together, conversation often turns to the review process. Editors commiserate about the difficult task of finding sufficient qualified scholars to take on the important task of reviewing. These conversations often mention the increase in submissions to the same journal over time, as well as the proliferation of journals. More journals and more submissions mean that scholars receive more requests to review, feel overburdened, and say "no" more often. They suffer from "reviewer fatigue." At least, that is the common wisdom.

However, this assessment is based on impressions rather than systematic inquiry. Are reviewers indeed overburdened with requests to review? The question is important. After all, it is impossible to make the peer review process work without reviewers.

To find out, we examined the information provided by scholars responding to requests to review from the *American Political Science Review* (APSR) during 2013.[1] There were 4563 requests to review associated with the manuscripts submitted that year. Excluding non-responses, 72.5% requests were accepted and 27.5% declined. However, if we include non-responses, the positive response rate drops to 60%.* The APSR is the leading journal in political science, which may influence scholars to accept our invitations. However, conversations with other editors suggest that this acceptance rate for invitations to review is common.

Scholars who declined to review had the opportunity to explain their reasons for refusal. We classified as cases of "reviewer fatigue" those who mentioned they had too many other requests to review. Some provided the specific number of invitations they had recently accepted – ranging from one to six. Although most mentioned numbers towards the higher end of this range, there is clearly variation in what scholars believe to be a reasonable review load.

We found that only 14.1% of scholars said they had too many other requests to review. An additional 24.8% indicated simply that they were "too busy." Although some of these may also have felt overburdened with review requests, we cannot know for sure as they did not specify what kept them so busy. Hence, we estimate that reviewer fatigue may affect more than 14.1% but less than 38.9% (the total of the two categories).

Aside from having too many review requests or being too busy, what else prompts scholars to decline an invitation to review? A variety of reasons were provided, each given by a small proportion of respondents (most categories scored around 3% or less). Some scholars said they had previously read or reviewed the paper. Although the perspective of such reviewers can be valuable for editors, some reviewers suggested that the author(s) might be better off with a fresh perspective. Others judged, on the basis of the title and abstract, that they did not have the right expertise. Some mentioned they had recently taken on administrative responsibilities or journal editorships. Yet others said they were on sabbatical or another type of professional leave. Some scholars declined to review because of personal issues, such as personal or family illness, and yet others mentioned they were on maternity or paternity leave. We also noted some small differences between women and men: the latter were more likely to decline for professional reasons, whereas the former were more likely to mention personal issues. Women were also a little more likely than men to decline because they had too many invitations to review or were simply too busy.

In conclusion, our data suggest that some reviewers are indeed overburdened with requests to review. However, the more important finding is that scholars have many demands on their time. The only way to manage this is to broaden the reviewer pool. With easily accessible online resources, such as Google Scholar, there is no reason to overburden a small group of scholars.[2] Many scholars, such as new PhDs and research-active scholars at a broad range of academic institutions, have never been asked to review for an academic journal in their field. It is time we identify these scholars and invite them to review.

* An unknown proportion of non-responses are requests that never reach the intended recipient, due to spam filters and changes in e-mail addresses. Hence, we cannot assume that non-responders have chosen to ignore our request.

References

1 Breuning, Marijke, Jeremy Backstrom, Jeremy Brannon, Ben Gross, and Michael Widmeier. 2015. "Reviewer Fatigue? Why Scholars Decline to Review their Peers' Work." *PS: Political Science and Politics*. 48(4):595-600.

2 Djupe, Paul A. 2015. "Peer Reviewing in Political Science: New Survey Results." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 48 (2):346-351.