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SciRev: an initiative for improving peer review transparency

<https://scirev.org/>

Claiming to improve “the weakest link in the chain of scientific knowledge production,” SciRev was founded by two European researchers Janine Huisman and Jeroen Smits in 2013. Unlike such scientific publishing information systems with high publicity as Publons or OSF, SciRev has entered the academic evaluation landscape without much fanfare (Graziotin, 2014). However, over the past five years or so the platform has, to a large extent, delivered what it promised: greater transparency through author-contributed evaluations of academic journals’ peer-review processes.

Its *modus operandi* is quite straightforward. An author who has undergone some previous academic publishing experience, or an editor who represents a journal, simply starts with registering for an account at <https://scirev.org/register/>. Once logged-in, one can start providing one’s own evaluations in data or text forms by clicking at “Submit review.” The action effectively enables an author to function as a peer reviewer for a target scientific journal. Collectively, collaborating authors power the SciRev system with a data-generating mechanism, somewhat similar to what peer-reviewers do to Publons.

Nonetheless, SciRev does not have the privilege connections to ISI Web of Science and ScholarOne Manuscripts while Publons does. The SciRev database system has to rely on the author-provided data, both quality, and quantity, for fulfilling its mission. However, authors from all walks of life have not failed the community as they continuously contribute data to SciRev, which render the system increasingly useful for scrutinising peer review processes at the journal level.

We can read reviews on journals without logging on the system. A table enumerating journals with data in the system shows up, and each journal can be checked easily by using its filtering function or browsing the list, eg *European Science Editing* at <https://scirev.org/journal/european-science-editing/>. All reviews can be read, and for some journals, the total number of reviews might be large, and comments/opinions might also be a bit “chaotic” with contradicting views, for instance, the case of PLoS One. However, collectively they represent a rather useful overall picture and assessments by the author community, and they are the *raison d’être* of a scientific publication.

At system-level, SciRev can provide a landscape for the publishing system like what Table 1 presents. In such fields as Medicine/Public health, authors can expect shorter peer review processes, at least for the first review round while economics/business and social sciences tend to take more time. SciRev provides more data tables like this one for free. And, there are more for an author/editor to explore with the system.

Last, but not the least, individual and aggregate data organized by SciRev would even enable researchers to better understand peer-review behaviors and community’s attitudes towards journals, fields, and SciRev founders’ paper in *Scientometrics* (2017) is one such attempt.

Although there is no such thing as a perfect database in scientific peer-review, which at best represents a voluntary service by the author community, SciRev initiative represents a serious effort in bringing transparency and community-enabled assessment toward one of the most important services provided by academic journals. It is also worth noting that SciRev has moved in the same direction with the Open Access movement,

which has recently been significantly boosted by the bold move of Plan S and backed by the world’s mighty scientific funders such as Wellcome Trust, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and the Chinese government.

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References

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Table 1. Statistics - Duration first review round

	Average (weeks)	Within 1 month (%)	Within 3 months (%)	Within 6 months (%)
All	13	19	68	90
- accepted	12			
- rejected	16			
General	11	11	77	96
Natural sciences	11	25	77	94
Engineering (incl technology)	13	21	71	89
Mathematics and computer sciences	17	11	54	82
Medicine	8	28	84	98
Public health (incl health professions)	9	27	81	97
Psychology	14	11	60	90
Economics, business, and law	18	10	55	82
Social sciences	17	8	50	86
Humanities	16	7	53	87

Duration first review round is the time between submission of a manuscript and the moment the editor informs the author(s) about the outcome of the first peer review round (Huisman & Smits, 2017).