

EASE-Forum Digest: March – June 2019

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Direct contact between reviewers and authors, and reviewers publishing their reviews

Pippa Smart asked three questions:

1. Does it matter if reviewers contact authors directly before submitting the review to a journal?
2. Does it make any difference if the reviewing process is open, that is, if the names of reviewers are disclosed to authors?
3. Is it in order for reviewers to post their reviews on an open site after the article has been published (when journals do not post reviews alongside the articles)?

In answer to the first two questions, the consensus was that peer review is a process conducted via a journal; consequently, any contact between reviewers and authors should be through that process. Foppe van Mil said that occasionally reviewers did ask him if they could contact the authors directly; he would then judge the situation and act as an intermediary if he considered the contact appropriate. He stressed that without such vetting, there was a danger that a culture of bribery may develop.

Two words – contract and confidentiality – were prominent in replies to questions 1 and 2. The word ‘contract’ was used loosely, although it has a strict legal meaning, namely an offer is made by one person to provide something to someone else for a consideration, that is, for something in return: parties to whom an offer is made may accept or reject the offer; if they accept, a contract is made between the parties. This is different from a peer reviewer agreeing to review for nothing because this is the convention in academia. Therefore, in this digest I concentrate on confidentiality.

Respondents to the questions generally considered that direct contact between reviewers and authors would be a breach of confidentiality and this would be no different in an open reviewing process, although, as an aside, Katarzyna Szmanska thought open review promoted more objective reviews and curbed competitors from providing poor reviews. Duncan Nicholas’s postings encompassed most of the views expressed. He pointed out that generally accepted codes of ethical conduct compel the reviewer to treat the content of a paper as confidential. However, in my view this is something different from a reviewer contacting an author whose details have been revealed to him or her by the journal. But Duncan also thought that a direct contact would be a breach of the generally agreed-upon confidentiality of the peer review process, especially if this was expressly stated in the journal’s reviewing policies. It seems to me that we have a situation where authors submit manuscripts to a journal implicitly agreeing that the journal may reveal their identity to the reviewer, that is, they forgo their own confidentiality. If reviewers then decide to contact the author, they too

forgo their confidentiality. Duncan pointed out that there may be practical reasons for confidentiality and anonymity in the review process relating to scientific endeavour itself, but I wonder how well the confidentiality argument really stands up when the authors and the reviewers dispense with the requirement. Duncan got closer to the points I am making when he wrote that he liked the system the Royal Society uses, in which authors and reviewers control the level of respective confidentiality by the authors declaring the level of openness of the reviews of their papers they are happy with, and the reviewers the openness they will allow.

Duncan also emphasized that journal policies vary. In some journals, reviewers and authors do contact each other, for example at EMBO journals and eLife reviewers and authors discuss comments and the process is collaborative with the journal facilitating the conversation.

Katarzyna noted that authors may wish to contact reviewers after receiving their comments. This can be done while responding to the comments but, in her experience, authors are often reluctant to press their points and to disagree with reviewers.

All respondents to question 3 were unanimous in objecting to reviewers posting the reviews without consent of the authors and the editors. Duncan repeated his point about this being a matter of journal policy and added that the policy in question should be made known to the reviewers. If a journal does not publish reviews on its own platform, it is unlikely to allow others to do so, or it may allow reviewers to post their comments on a website such as that of Publons, which encourages reviewers to post their referee reports.

Several people said that a document¹ from the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) makes it clear that reviewers hold the copyright to their reviews. The document is the result of a forum organized by COPE at which Andrew Preston, the CEO of Publons, was invited to discuss the issue. Bahar Mehmani quoted COPE’s conclusions² that reviews “are expressly solicited as a work product by a journal and – whatever the peer review model – are subject to an expectation of confidentiality. However, without an express agreement between the journal and the reviewer, it is questionable whether such obligation of confidentiality should be considered to apply only until a final decision is reached on the manuscript, or to extend indefinitely.” Her journal’s publisher, Elsevier, makes it clear in the letter it sends out inviting a review, in the follow-up letters, and in its guide to reviewers that they are expected to treat the manuscript and other communications as confidential. However, Pippa had asked the question because it is possible that in future reviewers will consider they do have a right to post their reviews wherever they like.

Katarzyna Szymanska did not see why reviewers would want to publish a review if the manuscript had been accepted for publication because the published paper was unlikely to be the same version as the reviewer had commented on. However, she thought a purely scientific commentary on the published version could be interesting.

Are citations of articles in foreign languages acceptable?

Taner Erdağ's journal based in Turkey asks authors who include references in a language other than their native tongue or English whether they can read and understand that language. If they do not, they have to provide a translation into their own language or in English. Taner Erdağ asked the forum whether an editor should accept a reference when, in these circumstances, the authors use Google Translate for the translation. Although this online tool's performance has improved over the years, he found an article, albeit published in 2013, which claimed that the tool was inadequate for surmounting language barriers in neonatal medicine.³

All participants agreed on the desirability of citing papers from different languages. Alan Hopkins stressed the necessity for authors to refer to all relevant previous work, in whatever language it may have been published, to present the existing state of knowledge. Foppe pointed out that the Vancouver style for referencing requires English-language journals (1) to include English translation of the title of any non-English article, (2) to enclose the translation within square brackets after giving, whenever possible, a transliterated version of the original title, and (3) to mention the language in which it was published.

Avi Staiman cautioned the forum that Google Translate continues to be only as good as the data on which it is based and is therefore more accurate in dealing with the more common languages in which science is published but struggles with less common languages. He recommended an article that explains when Google Translate could be trusted and when it should not be trusted.⁴ Although machine translation would be able to overcome language barriers in science publishing in the future, Are Brean believed that currently it cannot convey the subtleties of scientific language. He and others said they would not question the authors' language abilities or would accept the use of Google Translate as well as an authorized English abstract if only a couple of references fell into this category but would be cautious if it were the predominant category in the reference list.

That it was not enough for authors to have read only the English abstract was underlined by Aleksandra Gołębiowska and Eva Baranyiová, who had known authors who cited literature in support of their arguments although the original references were contrary to those ideas and conclusions.

Another problem in such cases is the possible inability of reviewers to assess the relevance of the original papers. If a paper cited many references in a foreign language, Pekka Nygren's journal seeks out a reviewer who not only has the required domain expertise but also knows the language in question and is aware of the relevant literature.

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