

Not for Sale: Peer Review, the Academy and the Bulwark of True Knowledge

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The peer review process in academia is something that is so engrained in the academic milieu, that sometimes we can lose sight of its importance. I wrote this piece to remind all in the academic community of the importance of the peer review process during the information age of which we currently find ourselves. The information age, as the name suggests, is based on the production, control and dissemination of all types of information. In many ways, the peer review process serves as an unbiased moderator of the ever growing stock of knowledge in the information age.

I am currently a peer review editor for two journals, including this one. My first peer review experience allowed me to see the power and importance of the process. I had submitted a manuscript to a graduate journal of history. I was also asked by the editor to be peer reviewer. The article that I reviewed was an excellent piece that dealt with anti-German propaganda in Serbian textbooks prior to the First World War. I gave the article a good deal of constructive criticism, but I found the piece an excellent fit for the journal and recommended it be published. To my dismay, a few weeks later I had found out that my manuscript had been rejected. However, when I read the journal, I saw that the article I had reviewed had been published with the recommended changes I had made. In addition, in a footnote, the author had thanked an anonymous peer reviewer for his/her helpful suggestions regarding the profession of teaching, that anonymous peer reviewer being me. While I was obviously disappointed that my manuscript was rejected, I did take some consolation in the fact that I had contributed in a small way to this superb article. This event illustrated how important the process of peer reviewing is in the creation of new knowledge.

The peer review process typically works like this. An author submits a manuscript to a journal. The editor then assigns the journal to two reviewers. This is a blind process which means that the author does not know who is reviewing

his/her manuscript and the reviewers do not know whose manuscript they are reviewing. The reviewers critique the manuscript, write recommendations and offer suggestions to strengthen it. Typically the editors look at both reviewers recommendations and based on them, decide whether or not to publish the piece as is, send it back to the author for further revisions, or reject it. This process can take anywhere from six weeks to six months. Some have called this process cumbersome and inefficient. Some astute businessmen have even set up pay to publish schemes, charging up to 650 US dollars to publish one article, usually in less than a month. The legitimacy and quality of these pay to publish journals however is questionable. Pay to publish journals claim to have peer review, but it is doubtful if any author that is willing to pay a fee is rejected (Truth, 2012).

Despite the slow nature of the process and the emerging predatory pay to publish schemes, peer review is still the most effective mode of knowledge creation and transmission. In an age when everything is for sale, true peer-review is not. When a person's work appears in a journal, they did not buy their way in there or draw on their social connections. Rather, their manuscript was of high quality and contributes significantly to the ever growing stock of knowledge. The amount of journals in the sciences, business and the humanities is increasing exponentially as a result of this growth. Due to its ability to produce knowledge, academia is the lifeblood of the information age. Yet academia is also increasingly dominated by corporate interests (Rhoads & Torres, 2006). So it is imperative that knowledge produced by scholars remains disinterested and free of corporate influence. If not, then knowledge production will be geared toward profit and not service. The slow, inefficient and cumbersome process of peer review is the cornerstone of disinterested, unbiased knowledge production.

Peer reviewers are anonymous, their contributions to the journal are also anonymous

but their importance and impact cannot be understated. In the most far reaching sense, peer reviewers, along with the authors and editors, are the drivers of socially beneficial knowledge which fuels the information age.

About the author

Angelo Letizia is a PhD student in the Educational Policy, Planning, and Leadership program, focusing on Higher Education.

References

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