

## VIEWPOINT

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# Time to stop the exploitation of free academic labour

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### Abstract

Commercial publishing houses continue to make unbounded profits while exploiting the free labour of researchers through peer review. If publishers are to be compensated financially for the value that they add within a capitalist system, then so should all others who add value, including reviewers. I propose that peer review should be included as a professional service by research institutes in their contracts with commercial publishers. This would help to recognize the value of peer review, and begin to shape it into a functional form of quality control.

**Keywords:** Peer review, scholarly publishing, Plan S, quality control, professional services

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### Introduction

Historically, peer review was considered to be an altruistic duty of academics, as scholarly publishing was largely a within-community and non-profit enterprise overseen by scholarly societies.<sup>1</sup> However, this altruism is easy to exploit. We know from limited information that a small proportion of the research community performs the majority of reviews;<sup>2-4</sup> so, although it might be generally altruistic for the wider community, it is certainly more beneficial for some than for others. Commercialization of this process in the post-World-War-2 era led to the hijacking and exploitation of this altruism for profiteering purposes.<sup>5</sup> Societies became drawn into this with a desire to remain 'competitive' within an increasingly neoliberal academia. Eventually, institutes, researchers, and funders all became locked into this system due to an increasing dependency on journals, which had become purposed for the unholy trinity of prestige, information, and assessment. This imbalance is weighted against post-colonial countries. All the major publishing houses operate primarily from western Europe, which has far more resource potential than developing nations. Because researchers from almost all around the world are forced in various ways to provide these services for the major 'international' publishers, it represents further exploitation of this inequity. Despite having less infrastructure and funding than developed nations, developing nations are held to the same standards and scholarly communication expectations, further reinforcing the global imbalance in knowledge acquisition and production.<sup>6</sup>

Researchers and research institutes now have a strange relationship with the commercial publishing sector. Some are addicted to the system simply because their careers depend so greatly on it. Others are wedded to journals and even defend them, precisely because their careers have benefited from their existence. Career progression, awards, and reputation are all things primarily built based upon one's publication record.<sup>7</sup> Over time, this has created a strange blend of nonchalance, apathy, and elitism towards scholarly publishing from much of the research sector. Combined with a view that 'it has always been this way', and led to a system of cultural inertia where we still rely now on 350-year-old technologies and the processes embedded with them, including peer review. The combined

result of this attitude problem, the stagnation, and the tight system-lock in is that academic labour is now exploited in a number of different dimensions to support a variety of non-profit and for-profit ventures.

Now, there are a number of high-level changes happening in the world of scholarly publishing. For example, Plan S originating in Europe,<sup>8</sup> and recent discussions around a new Executive Order in the USA that could accelerate public access to knowledge. However, virtually all of these high-level changes have ignored, either intentionally or passively, the critical issue of exploitation of free labour in the scholarly publishing sector. Even more strangely, many of these national and institutional policies now mandate their researchers to publish in journals operated by commercial publishing houses but, at the same time, do not reimburse researchers for doing this in any way, or fairly. Nor do they ask those commercial publishers to compensate their employees for outsourcing their labour. Instead, many of these major political changes in the last decade seem to be focused more on preserving the revenue streams of the existing publishing system, rather than creating a fair and competitive market.<sup>9</sup> Because of its low apparent financial value, peer review activities are consistently unrecognized and undervalued in evaluation procedures, which creates a strange tension as they are simultaneously considered to be a critical element of scholarly activities and an expected part of the job for academics.<sup>10</sup> This is especially critical due to the increase in non-tenure jobs in academia, which are no longer fairly compensated to counterbalance the exploitation of free labour. Fair compensation must be a critical part of future discussions on scholarly communication. It cannot be divorced from issues about creating a healthier academic culture.<sup>11</sup>

### Peer review is a professional service

With this evolutionary shift towards a more commercial system in mind, why is providing pro bono services to those commercial publishers still seen as a duty or responsibility? It makes sense based on a historical legacy of duty to one's community, but not now, since it is dominated by a powerful commercial empire.<sup>12</sup> How have academics been gullible enough to fall for this scheme, at the expense of billions of dollars a year, and the outsourcing of ownership of our

scholarly legacy? The duty that scholars have now is to make their work available to anyone who wants it: universal open access, so that knowledge serves the people and not profits.<sup>13</sup>

This is a hypocrisy embedded in the core of our scholarly production and communication systems. Commercial publishers argue that they provide sufficient ‘added-value’ to be entitled to financial compensation for their activities. If this is true, then by extension all other providers in the chain who add value should be similarly compensated for their labour. The biggest publishers are multinational corporations, often with billions of dollars in annual revenue and hefty net profit margins.<sup>12</sup> As part of a capitalist system, they must appropriately compensate the work that supports them as a matter of principle, including retroactively reimbursing all reviewers for their work as labourers. Within scholarly publishing, on the supply side we have the funders and authors, and in the ‘production’ side, the editors, typesetting staff, administrative staff, and all of the others needed to support the industry. Besides authors, peer reviewers are the only stakeholder group not financially reimbursed for their labour. Peer review is a professional service, and there should be legal requirements for it. This includes, at a bare minimum, financial reimbursement, authoritative standards and checklists, and transparency and objectivity. There is absolutely no way that peer review can maintain its standing as a professional form of quality control (QC) without these things.<sup>14</sup>

We know that the average income generated is \$5000 per article,<sup>15</sup> and none of it goes to those who put in the most work: authors, peer reviewers, and editors do not receive commensurate compensation for the free labour that they provide to publishers. Authors, reviewers, and editors typically provide the invaluable services that keep the publishing machine rolling: writing, typesetting (for example with LaTeX), reviewing for technical accuracy, proofing, copy editing, archiving, and distributing — all things that are highly skilled and time consuming. On the other hand, researchers often acknowledge that we seem to pay publishers for the Herculean effort of introducing problems into our papers: broken links, formatting issues, delays to publication, and useless proprietary article-rendering formats.

Any researcher can calculate the financial value of the efforts put into peer review simply based on the number of hours spent on it and the salary. On average, a typical researcher spends 2–6 hours reviewing a research paper, depending on the type of article.<sup>16,17</sup> Around 3 million peer-reviewed English-language articles are now published in STM journals each year.<sup>18</sup> The total and unpaid cost of reviewers’ time globally each year has been estimated at £1.9 billion, a lower bound that does not account for the laborious reject-resubmit cycle.<sup>19,20</sup> This unpaid work is foundational to a \$25.7-billion-a-year industry,<sup>18</sup> which would not be able to exist without such services.

At its core, peer review is a form of QC, and QC protocols in almost any other industry are standardized and considered a form of professional consultancy and labour. The scholarly publishing industry is unique in that its primary form of QC is neither standardized nor compensated for. Being invited to review a paper is an explicit acknowledgement of professional expertise in a sector, and must be treated that way. Graduate students often get paid extra for things like grading papers and examinations, so why should it be different for peer review? If a researcher is commissioned by a company for professional

consulting services, then why is peer review any different? All other actors in the publishing system get appropriate financial compensation, so why not peer reviewers? If peer review is an altruistic activity that the community benefits from, then why are publishers the only ones who reap financial rewards for it? If academics do any other form of work, including writing news articles, books, or consultation, they get paid for it, so why not for peer review?

Institutes pay researchers to do research, but many researchers are independent or are salaried via other means. Peer review takes time away from research, and the value is capitalized on by a third party at the expense of an institute. I doubt that any institute would be particularly happy in knowing the total amount of unfinanced labour their staff give out to for-profit entities each year. In job adverts and descriptions for researchers, it very rarely says anything along the lines of ‘perform professional services for third-party commercial entities without any form of compensation’. Because of this, peer review work is often done outside of professional hours as a form of unpaid overtime. This is an increased burden on an already overworked community. If reviewers stopped reviewing, their salaries would remain exactly the same, and they would get more personal work done for their employers and funders. Reviewers already get ‘rewarded’ in a way as they are able to list their reviewer activities on their CVs, or on platforms such as Publons. However, performing a professional service for the potential perception of prestige or privilege is akin to the ‘do it for the publicity’ arguments that plague the art and media industries.

Peer review is not dependent on the publishing industry. If the private sector did not exist, peer review would still function through existing alternatives. Yet, the entire publishing sector is utterly dependent on peer review to function. This represents an incredible asymmetry in power, and yet the value flow is in the opposite direction. If all researchers decided in synchrony to stop peer reviewing, the entire publishing industry would collapse—or at least the substantial revenues and profits that the private publishing sector makes could be greatly reduced. This is a problem that requires collective action, but such a simple notion indicates precisely where the core value in the process should lie.

### **A potential solution**

Simply, universities and research institutes should start directly charging publishers for services. Contracts already exist between universities and publishers, often now termed ‘transformative agreements’ in the wake of Plan S. There is no reason why peer review, as a professional service, should not be bundled into these contracts. For example, universities could agree that their staff will provide a certain number of reviews for a publisher in exchange for a commensurate discount on subscriptions or open access. This can be tied directly into ‘transformative agreements’ as a powerful form of negotiation leverage. If publishers do not lower their costs and provide financial reimbursement, then universities can stop those publishers from exploiting their staff as free labour. Thus, there is a strong incentive for newly forming library and university consortia to support these initiatives as a form of collective action.<sup>21</sup> This does not need to be applied to all publishers but can be selective, for example explicitly at the ‘big-five’ publishing houses, or only commercial or for-profit

ventures, or only those that are clearly able to afford it by having excessive profit margins. Ultimately, the solution is focused around universities or learned societies 'sub-contracting' their employees' or members' labour.

Additional potential side effects of this are possible. Sharing the peer review load more fairly and evenly across the research community by diversifying and expanding the reviewer pool is one. As a result of this, we might see increasing innovation and operationalization of peer review, for example through systems of micro-contributions and version control, which would reduce the burden on any individual researcher.<sup>10</sup>

### What is stopping this?

One argument is that authors already receive appropriate credit for their work in a variety of forms; many, but not all, already receive a salary or grant from their funders or respective institutes. If publishers were to start paying reviewers, including indirectly, they are not going to willingly do so if this eats into their net income and profits. As such, publishers would likely begin to lump these costs into existing contracts in order to cover them, thus imposing a further burden on researchers and institutes. This could potentially damage smaller publishers with less revenue too, who might be unable to afford paying their reviewers. However, if a publisher cannot support itself without free volunteer labour, then it has a serious problem with its business model. The idea that we should continue to support commercial entities with uncompensated labour just to protect their functionality is unheard of in any other industry. If publishers were to increase their prices to compensate for paying reviewers, this would simply confirm that, historically, they have not been operating fairly, and that the costs for the relative value of services they offer is disproportionate.

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