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Abuse of peer review process by sham authors

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Academic peer review is a process that has been trusted by journals across the world to ensure that the quality of research and other publications is maintained.¹ The process was initiated in 1665 with the publication of *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* to ensure that standards were upheld in publishing.² Since then the peer review process has remained largely the same, where reviewers with knowledge in the subject area read the draft and provide their feedback. The peer review process has gained widespread acceptance and notoriety in the last century.

Despite the shortfalls and criticisms of the review process, journal editors and authors have come to accept it as a way to safeguard publication quality. If the draft is good quality, it is accepted for publication and if not, one or more rounds of correction and review follow before the draft is accepted for publication. Novelty of the work, contribution to the knowledge pool, originality, relevance, importance, methodology and potential impact are assessed by reviewers. Hence, peer review plays a crucial role in the publishing world.

On one side, authors complain that the review process is not always professional or ethical. Conversely however, some authors abuse the review process by submitting manuscripts with no real intention of publishing them. In some universities and learning institutions the workload is too heavy, making it impossible for the lecturers or teachers to evaluate assignments or term-papers submitted for assessment. Some lecturers look for shortcuts by submitting them to journals for peer review and then award marks based on the feedback received from reviewers. This is a clear abuse of the peer review process where a manuscript is submitted with no intention to publish.

Though many journals take a few months to review and publish a paper, some new age journals have tried to reduce the publication time by using an online submission system, devised for faster processing of papers. There are however, “sham authors” who try to take advantage of this situation by abusing the system, sometimes even going to the extent of creating fake identities and false email accounts to avoid detection.³ Some scholars try to get review reports to improve their work or ensure the validity of their research, though there is no intention to publish it. There are many other examples of malpractice that prompted Steen, Casadevall and Fang⁴ to remark that the behaviour of authors and institutions is changing. So it is essential that journals and learning institutions take adequate steps to prevent misconduct.

To avoid abuse of the peer review system and recoup a proportion of their expenses, some journals levy a submission fee; this will certainly act as a deterrent to unscrupulous authors who take advantage of free review. Journals could choose to return the submission fee to authors whose manuscripts are published. They also need to invest in the development of a robust system that can recognise fake identities and frivolous submissions. At the same time, learning institutions need to develop a code of conduct and monitor the actions of their staff.

In the absence of a viable alternative for the peer review process, journals should devise ways to minimise fake submissions by naming and blacklisting the authors behind them. As a preventative measure, they could impose a submission fee to avoid abuse of this trusted, long-standing system.

References

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