

Reviewing manuscripts on my terms

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Many of us are for various reasons frustrated with the current state of affairs of academic publishing. This topic has many elements and moving parts — some contentious — and is closely connected with the evolution of modern academics in relation to expectations that contribute to a frenetic pace in pursuing and publishing scholarly work. Moreover, there are numerous activities afoot that are aimed at changing the landscape toward new and perhaps better ways of publishing, or, more generally, making the results of scholarly work more accessible to all. I suspect we will witness interesting changes in the next decade or so, although I am skeptical that we will experience a sea change either in our expectations for doing fast science, or in how and where we publish, or in the current model of academic publishing.^{1,2} Meanwhile, here I offer perspective on one part of this topic that can be a source of frustration if not angst — a part that I can mostly control on my terms: reviewing manuscripts.

As scientists our social contract includes, among other things, contributing to the collective endeavor of discovery by serving as reviewers of manuscripts — a commitment of time determined by the frequency and thoroughness of our reviews. My sense, elaborated below, is that the system has evolved wherein we allow ourselves to be bullied, such that the expected frequency of reviews and the terms of the review process are set by journal publishers rather than by us, the reviewers, based on our own sensibilities of how to balance the elements of the social contract.

Judging from conversations with colleagues, it seems that we often are quick to accept review responsibilities for reasons that have little to do with the merits or reality of the situation. For example, we imagine the need to provide reviews because otherwise we might be put on some journal editor’s naughty list, thereby decreasing the chances of being able to publish in the journal; or we imagine that because the request comes from a high-profile journal we are more than ordinarily obliged to accept it, maybe with the sense that such a request reflects recognition of stature; or we think that, in a momentary state of Fear Of Missing Out, we risk not being asked again to review for the journal if we decline a request; or we think that because we recently published in a journal we are obliged to accept the next few requests from that journal despite our misgivings that we are suitably qualified; or we think that, for various reasons, we “owe” the authors of the manuscript; or we imagine the need to add lines to our curriculum vitae under the heading of service, when in fact few will actually pay attention to this.

I suggest that we have become conditioned to think that scientific progress hinges on our current frantic pace (it does not), an impression reinforced by institutional expectations, which in turn feeds the illusion of a need for a frantic commitment to the review process in order to maintain our participatory standing. Certainly there can be an element of timeliness in certain fields such as epidemiology and perhaps climate-change science. But this is not

¹Puehringer, S., Rath, J., and Griesebner, T. (2021) The political economy of academic publishing: On the commodification of a public good, *PLoS ONE* 16(6), e0253226. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0253226>

²Burany, S. (2017) Is the staggeringly profitable business of scientific publishing bad for science? <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2017/jun/27/profitable-business-scientific-publishing-bad-for-science>

the case for most fields, and growing numbers of retractions are almost certainly attributable in part to inadequate, perhaps rushed, reviews.³ Rather, the pace is about publishers pushing to move manuscripts through the process to generate profit in a system where editors now focus on the science side of things and are more or less disconnected, by design, from the workings of the publishing side.

The thing that touched me off, leading to this essay, involved an automated review request from a journal of a major profit-driven publisher with the wording:

“Review comments will be due within 14 days...”

“If you... need more time... send an email... requesting an extension.”

I find this, or similar wording, in an automated “request” to be deeply offensive. My immediate reaction was:

So, you’re expecting me to work for free for your profit-driven enterprise, and you’re not only telling me when my work is due, but also that I must *request* an extension — from you — if needed?⁴

It is an obvious point, but I do not work for any journal nor its editors, I do not work for any professional organization with which such journals might be affiliated, and I certainly do not work for the publishers of such journals. Rather, at most I have implicitly agreed to participate in the social contract described above. The only real payoff I receive is intellectual satisfaction of seeing new work and helping with its broader presentation, and nominal credit for professional service expected of me by my university.

³Ivan Oransky and Adam Marcus note: “If readers are finding problems in papers after they are published, why are peer reviewers not catching them beforehand? Does the failure of reviewers to identify misconduct or honest error prior to publication mean that peer review is broken? It certainly means that we are more aware of its flaws now that all scientists can easily be post-publication peer reviewers. But anyone who thought peer review was a *Good Housekeeping* seal of approval, even before the Internet, was sold — perhaps willingly — a bill of goods. Why should we expect that a few experts, who may not really be experts at all in the techniques used in a given study, would be able to spot every error?” (<https://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/two-cheers-for-the-retraction-boom>)

⁴From my perspective this represents exceedingly annoying chutzpah, that publishers imagine it to be their prerogative to insist that I ask *them* for permission to do volunteer work as I see fit.

I have heard reactions from colleagues to the effect that this is just standard wording from these journals, and that one should just let it go and choose to do the review or not, adjusting one’s time commitment as needed. But that’s the point. We have become so inured to this type of corporate view of our time and efforts that we just roll with it, without confronting its impact on us. The wording above is purposefully crafted with corporate blessing. It assumes that potential reviewers are sufficiently conditioned to have bought into the myth that the publisher has the prerogative to set the terms of the review process, forgetting that the publisher’s actions in this process are designed merely to help fuel the free-labor (to them) profit engine, with perfunctory interest in the scholarly endeavor outside of this objective. And to be clear, this is free labor only to the publisher.^{1,2} In fact our labor is not free. It is payed for as salary or wages by our employers, or as a real loss of our personal time.

I therefore offer the following approach to reviewing manuscripts, which works for me, recognizing that it might not be right for others. It is an approach I settled into during a rapidly changing publishing landscape that included: a proliferation of new journals, notably short-format journals; the transfer of many established journals managed by professional societies to publishing companies; the transition from print to online publishing and the adoption of impersonal online submission and review systems; and increasing expectations of rapid reviews. I am empathetic to the situation of early-career scholars who must figure out what works for them in navigating the system.

For starters, I do not review manuscripts for journals from certain publishers — those that

are purely profit-driven enterprises capitalizing on free labor with little regard for the scientific endeavor, or are antagonistic to the principle and practice of open access to scholarly work, or have persistently gouged university libraries. I have learned that in order to formally decline an automated email request from some of these journals one must register with their online review systems, which I will not do. Email requests from such journals therefore promptly land in my junk email folder.

I review manuscripts that seem interesting based on the abstracts, or, in some cases, based on the full manuscripts — especially if they represent fresh work of early-career scientists. Here, “interesting” does not necessarily imply that the content of a manuscript must fall squarely within my expertise. I am comfortable with reviewing manuscripts whose content falls outside the specifics of my expertise.⁵ Sometimes authors will ask if I am willing to provide a review of their work with the idea of recommending me as a reviewer; usually I am familiar with what they are doing and can anticipate receiving a review request. Sometimes an editor will ask me separately from an automated request to provide a review specifically because they want to hear my perspective on the work. Sometimes I contact authors directly to discuss their work. I do not subscribe to the “editor’s naughty list” myth, nor fret FOMO, nor sense that I owe authors, nor worry about my curriculum vitae. And I certainly do not imagine that scientific progress hinges on my providing numerous, rapid reviews.

Here is the key part. The details vary with the journal, but in general if I receive an automated request for a review and I decide that I am willing to provide a review, I communicate my intention directly with the associate editor or editor (and staff) who initiated the request.

I ask them to send pdf copies of the manuscript and any supplementary material directly to me (if these are not already accessible), separately from the online review system. I do not register as a reviewer with such systems. I provide to the editors an estimate of the time that I will need to complete the review. In doing so I ignore whatever imaginary deadline the automated request indicates, particularly short-fuse deadlines that seem to have become fashionable with short-format journals.⁶ Moreover, I make it clear that I do not want to receive any automated (e.g., “reminder”) emails from the journal review system. And here’s the thing. My experience indicates that if an editor or associate editor really wants my review, then they are happy to accommodate these simple requests. This includes high-profile journals. Moreover, journal staff involved in this handling of a manuscript typically are graciously helpful. If an editor (or journal staff) rejects my requests, for example, insisting that I use the online review system, then I do not review the manuscript.⁷ If I require more time to craft my review than I initially anticipated, I again contact the editor directly with an update on where I am with my review. (Editors seem to appreciate this.)

I am no longer flooded by review requests as I once was a decade or so ago. And, because my situation affords the doing of slow science, I am not inclined to pay much attention to the current frantic pace of things. I do not view the number of review requests I receive as a badge of honor nor as a measure of my stature as a scientist. I do not imagine that I need to see as a reviewer the work of others before anyone else sees it. I am just fine receiving a modest number of review requests, sometimes personalized by smart (clever) editors who value my style of reviewing more than adhering to the checking of boxes.

⁵In my reviews I clearly state to the authors and editors what parts of the manuscripts I am qualified to evaluate and what parts I am not.

⁶Interestingly the two-week period specified in the quote above came from an applied mathematics journal that is neither short-format nor high-profile, reinforcing my perception that some journals (publishers) have no qualms about trying to place increasingly demanding expectations on reviewers to accelerate their profit engines. Humorously, the second email request actually used the words “grateful” and “please,” and specified 30 days.

⁷In one case, despite my repeated requests to stop the system from sending annoying automated emails, I continued to receive them. I no longer review manuscripts for this journal — a situation I initially second guessed but which now is a relief. I had previously received a citation from this journal as an outstanding reviewer.