

TO BLIND OR NOT TO BLIND? A PERSONAL OPINION ON THE PEER-REVIEW PROCESS

It is widely believed that a blind review of submitted manuscripts to scientific journals, together with the concealment of the peer-reviewers' names (double-blinding), is the ideal way to impartially and objectively assess research papers, thereby minimizing bias.

Maybe this holds true in the world of Alice in Wonderland, but in the real world I do have strong personal doubts, based on over 30 years of professional experience in the field that this is in reality the very best way to handle such a delicate matter. In fact, I rather prefer the idea of a totally unblinded review process, with both authors and reviewers known (double open peer review).

This opinion is based on the disadvantages of the double-blind peer review process, for example:

1. It is more time consuming and complicated, since it requires accurate pre-reading of the manuscript and censoring the institutions, countries, references, clinical trial registration numbers, ethics committees, and any other information that would make the authors easy to identify;
2. An expert in the field will in any case have a good idea of who the authors of the manuscript are, and, at the same time, the reviewers often make themselves identifiable by some of the comments they provide. For instance, in a specific field with few specialists, it is possible to make an educated guess as to the identity of an author or reviewer based simply on what they wrote. The same can apply to those supporting extreme views not in line with mainstream thinking;
3. It leaves the door open to "keyboard warriors", i.e., reviewers who, under the cover of anonymity, give a bad review in the attempt to get a manuscript rejected, simply because they feel it competes with their work or ideas. By having a double open peer-review system, on the other hand, reviewers would be more likely to act more responsibly, and authors would have a better chance of defending their work.

The aim of the review process should be to improve, whenever possible, the quality of the manuscript. Hence, in some cases it might be helpful for authors to discuss the matter directly with expert reviewers in order to find a reasonable solution to their qualms. Sometimes, the views of experts are merely based on their opinion, and open to question by the authors. It is very important to allow authors to defend their opinions. When disputes that cannot be solved by the authors and reviewers arise, it will be up to the editors to judge and make the definitive decision to publish or not to publish on a case-by-case basis.

It has been suggested that each reviewer's comments should be published as an appendix to the article, including their names and that of the editor in charge. In this way, reviewers would be more careful about what they say, because everybody would be able to read what they wrote, and see who made the decision to publish a particular manuscript. Although this idea is appealing in principle, it does have several practical limitations.

First of all, the amount of published material would increase considerably. In addition, the comments of the reviewer would apply to the manuscript originally submitted, which could be very different to that eventually published. Indeed, the same article could have undergone several rounds of revision. Or, the author may have explained convincingly to the editor, in private communication, why they felt the reviewer's comments were irrelevant or even incorrect, and therefore should be ignored.

The review process may involve the exchange of a lot more information than just the reviewer's comments. Therefore, publishing only the latter would give an incomplete view of the process. Moreover, the authors themselves could be publicly humiliated by publishing the reviewer's comments; they may have made grave mistakes or silly oversights in the original submission, which were then corrected thanks to the reviewers' pointing them out.

Furthermore, one of the most difficult challenges facing editors nowadays, in addition to receiving good-quality manuscripts, is finding competent and serious reviewers willing to undertake a time-consuming, demanding, and unpaid job. Reviewing requires a great deal of skill, and the number of manuscripts and the competition between journals is continuously growing. However, this extreme competition and dramatic increase in outlets is providing fertile ground for the so-called "predatory" journals that publish terrible articles, thereby discrediting serious science.

Happy reading,

Marco