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ENGL 4405

25 March 2022

Ending Peer Review Manipulation: A Cultural Approach

Peer review manipulation is a rising issue in academic publishing. These factors include archaic academic publishing guidelines and predatory business models. Peer review manipulation has existed for a long time, but the internet has inflamed the issue. While several strategies and codes of ethics are being developed in response, the most significant problems with peer review lie in the external factors discussed above. By studying the origins and implications of peer review, possible solutions involving changes to the current publishing culture will be proposed.

Peer review manipulation has existed for a long time. However, with the rise of internet technology and online submission platforms, the opportunity for abuse has increased. According to Kulkarni, a writer and editor for the London School of Economics and Social Science, there is a distinct “publish or perish” culture in academia (Kulkarni, “Manipulating the Peer Review Process: Why it Happens and How it Might be Prevented”). This culture, combined with a focus on revenue over product quality, created a breeding ground for peer review manipulation. Authors, editors, and even journals are pressured to meet certain quotas and deadlines. A specific amount of published work is required to earn promotions, grants, and salary increases. As a result, early career academics are often tempted to manipulate the peer review process in some manner.

Peer review processes are easily abused due to the forms they are often conducted in; single or double-blind peer review. The most popular of the two is a double-blind peer review, in which both the author and the reviewer remain anonymous to each other. This method is currently seen as the best approach for preserving integrity and receiving transparent feedback. However, the system is relatively easy to exploit. Reviewers can use anonymity to hide false credentials from both the author and reviewers. This leaves the editor as the only credible filter between the manuscript and publication. If the editor overlooks signs of fraudulent peer review, then manuscripts with skewed or false information could be published.

The implications of peer review manipulation are varied. Though competition and profit margins encourage manipulation, more significant issues are at stake. Kulkarni claims that “It stalls scientific progress, is expensive for institutions and funding bodies, and might pose a risk to humans and animals. In other words, it can be detrimental to the very fabric of science” (Kulkarni, “Manipulating the Peer Review Process: Why it Happens and How it Might be Prevented”). While she specifically advocates for academic publishing in scientific journals, the implications go beyond. Credibility is vital for journals as a funding source and a continued supply of reputable papers. If this is disrupted, authors will turn to other journals, or worse, the ethics of publishing and academia at large will come into question.

An excellent example of this is citation manipulation investigated by Dutch publisher Elsevier in 2019. Citation manipulation involves authors under review, including their reviewers' research, in exchange for positive feedback. After analyzing over 55,000 entries, Elsevier found that in some cases, editors in positions of power were using their influence to boost the number of citations their own research received. Nature.com, reporting on the investigation, adds, “ In 2017, Artemi Cerdà resigned from the journal’s editorial board after being accused of using his

power to boost his own citation count and that of the journals he edited" (Chawla, nature.com). Authors, reviewers, and even editors are using double-blind peer review to further their academic agendas at the expense of quality and integrity.

In response, Elsevier considered possible solutions, such as retracting references to individual studies in papers. Publicationethics.org offers helpful charts on spotting and preventing peer-review manipulation. The chart, to prevent manipulation, details four steps to follow once manipulation has been identified. 1) Require the authors to submit manuscripts to journals personally. This will reduce the risks of third-party submissions and unqualified reviewers. 2) Use institutional emails or a verified ORCIDS ID when searching for qualified peer reviewers. This allows the editor to verify reviewers' credentials before inviting them to read manuscripts. 3) Ensure that suggested reviewers are qualified to review the manuscript based on expertise and verify their institutional email. 4) Check for strange signs of behavior in a combination that suggests peer review manipulation (publicationethics.org). These signs include positive reviews contrasting a majority of negative ones, fraudulent or non-institutional emails, and reviewer expertise unrelated to the author's work. While this is excellent, spotting peer review manipulation is only part of the problem.

One of the leading mechanical problems is double-blind peer review. If they were revised to a more transparent approach, it could be easier for fraudulent reviews and reviewers to slip through. Such policies could include switching to an open peer review model or post-publication reviewal after a certain amount of time has elapsed. Additionally, the competitive nature of academic publishing could be improved. Instead of emphasizing production volume, universities could require fewer publications of higher quality. This could reduce the amount of early-career academics who feel pressured into gaming the system. Publishing business models could also be

restructured to reflect the quality of the product over the number of volumes produced. Combined with relaxed academic publishing standards, this could alleviate the pressures compelling academics to manipulate peer review.

Works Cited

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