

On the Importance of Refereeing

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Refereeing articles is a necessary task with absolutely no rewards. Currently, there is a national debate starting around the issue of intellectual property rights and the role academicians in the process of bringing journals to libraries. The argument being made is that academicians write the articles for the journals, referee the articles for the journals, and serve as the editors guarding the quality of the journals, all without any compensation. All the journals do is to print the pages and then they turn around and sell the product to the libraries used by the very same academicians. The fact remains that in a "publish or perish" world, somebody has to do the refereeing. Too many of us take the attitude that we are too busy and that our work is so important that someone else should do the job. But who?

Our community has already suffered a big loss due to this negligent attitude. The National Science Foundation now decides the fate of grant applications by panel as opposed to the traditional set of mail reviews. No one I have spoken to, in the community or at NSF thinks that this is a good idea. The almost universal opinion is that this is a very bad idea. So why did NSF abandon the mail review system? The answer is simply that the community did not respond to requests for mail reviews. A decade ago, when I was at NSF, I had to send out 8 requests to get the 3 required reviews to make a decision. Apparently, the situation has gotten worse. So, we are to blame for the situation.

Now, back to the issue of refereeing for journals. What will happen if people continue to refuse to referee papers? Well, for starters, the publication delays will increase. Even worse, the issue of quality control will be left up to the fewer and fewer people who graciously still referee papers. Editors may refuse to handle papers from scientists who refuse to referee. The situation could rapidly become ugly. Part of the problem is that there are no guidelines for how much reviewing an individual should do. The purpose of this note (you might be beginning to wonder if there was one) is to propose such a guideline.

For journal purposes, each paper needs two referees. So a first level approximation is that everyone should review two papers for each one submitted. However, the task can be distributed over co-authors. To figure out how many papers you should referee in a year, associate the fraction 1 over the number of co-authors for each paper you write. Take the sum of these fractions and multiply by 2 and you have your minimal refereeing load needed to maintain good citizen status in the publishing community. Have you been doing your part

The above formula does not include refereeing for conferences. Fortunately, when it comes to conferences, the situation appears to almost self-regulating in that the more one publishes in a conference to more often they are asked to serve on the associated program committee. The job of editing for journals is also not factored into the above metric. This job can also be

time consuming as, especially when people either refuse to referee or, even worse, don't reply to requests from editors. Since it is the editors of the journals who are most aware of the situation, perhaps self-regulation will work for them. Despite the drawbacks to the metric introduced above, it is clear that many people are not doing anywhere near their fair share of refereeing and this situation places those that do at an unfair disadvantage. Hopefully, this note will stimulate some discussion and maybe even some renewed vigor amongst those most recalcitrant in living up to their fair share of the publication burden.