Reviewing the Review Process

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As Allegra's reviews editor, I am not only dealing with awesome new publications every week, but also get to think and talk a lot with authors and editors about open access policies, the reviewing process and whether or under what conditions academics should be financially rewarded for their expertise which they are often expected to provide for free. I received an email the other day which I thought was interesting. It went as follows:

> *"Dear Colleague,*
> *All of us who publish in scientific journals know the frustrations of the peer review process: endlessly waiting for an uncertain outcome.*
> *We have built a website aimed at changing this situation. At https://www.SciRev.sc researchers can share their experience about the review process and select an efficient journal for submitting their work. We already have received over 3000 review experiences, an overview of which can be found at https://www.scirev.sc/reviews/. At the website you can make comparisons by scientific field, or look at the ratings of specific journals. Many researchers supplement their ratings with a motivation which are very interesting to read. These provide a recognizable and sometimes revealing picture of what researchers experience in their attempts to publish their work. Given the large number of scientific journals, more reviews are needed to make good comparisons possible. We therefore invite you to come to our website and fill in the short questionnaire to share your experiences with your colleagues. SciRev also offers you the possibility to create a free account where you can administer your manuscripts under review and create a personal journal list.*
> *Thanks on behalf of the research community,*
> *Janine Huisman & Jeroen Smits"*

I am personally regularly torn between seeing the beauty in "sharing" our knowledge via the peer review process and criticizing what is increasingly an exploitative system run by corporations on the back of mostly untenured, precarious scholars. Anna Tsing, in her recent book (2015), puts the finger in the wound when she depicts the commoditization of scholarship as being "[o]ne of the strangest projects of privatization and commodification in the early twentieth-first [sic!] century" (p.285). SciRev as a database might help its users to calculate costs and benefits and it promises to ease frustration rather than adding yet another sterile way to measure creativity. I wanted to know more about this project and contacted the people who run it. Janine Huisman was so kind to answer my questions.

Judith: Thank you for agreeing to answer my questions, Janine. You have a background in anthropology and economics; what were your personal experiences with peer review, given the fact that you are covering two very different disciplines? What led you into developing SciRev?

Janine: Jeroen Smits, my colleague and co-founder of SciRev, and I both have a background in Social Sciences. Jeroen studied psychology and sociology in which he also has a PhD. I studied economics and anthropology and have a PhD in Management Sciences on an interdisciplinary topic (education in developing countries). Some bad experiences with the peer review process (the usual ones, waiting very long for a rejection based on weak review reports) led us to the decision to start this website.

Judith: On your website you argue that the peer review process "is one of the weakest links in the process of scientific knowledge production" – could you elaborate and explain how SciRev makes things better?

Janine: Whereas other phases of the scientific process have become much more efficient in the last decades, the duration of the peer review process has only increased. Review reports have become more detailed and the number of review rounds have increased. Writing a review report has become more work and

intellectually more challenging, but the peer review process is still largely reliant on invisible, voluntary work by researchers. At the same time, publication pressure, teaching load and bureaucracy has increased tremendously. On the one hand, this has led to more submissions, which have to be reviewed. On the other hand, this also means less time to spend on reviewing. For editors it is becoming more and more difficult to find reviewers who are willing and able to send in review reports in time. Researchers on the other hand, complain that the peer review process is too slow and review reports often are of substandard quality.

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Judith: There is so far little coverage of anthropological journals in SciRev. How can this be changed?

Janine: There already are quite a number of anthropological journals which have been reviewed on SciRev (you can see these by typing in 'anthropology' in the right, green search engine on the SciRev-website). However, of course it would be wonderful to cover many more anthropological journals.

We hope that anthropologists who read your blog will visit our website and report their experiences with the submission process of their papers. The more anthropologists do so, the more useful SciRev will become to all of them.

Judith: Why should journal editors be interested in submitting information to SciRev?

Janine: The most important aim of SciRev is of course to give authors the possibility to share their experience regarding the peer review process with their colleagues. With this information it will be easier for authors to choose the right journal in which to publish their work. Editors can supplement the information available at SciRev with other useful information that helps authors to select a

journal to publish their work. We have obtained very positive feedback of editors who use the information posted on SciRev by their authors to improve the quality of their editorial processes.

Judith: Last year you wrote on your homepage about setting up a paid review system in which referees get a fair payment for their work (around 100$ per review) if they manage to complete their review on time. What has come out of this idea and how do you intend to realize it?

Janine: We think that a major weakness of the peer review system is that it is based on charity. You cannot say to volunteers that their reports came in too late or are of low quality. If reviewers are paid for their work, it is possible to set quality standards and requirements for a speedy return. We therefore think that it is unavoidable to make this step, although the change probably will go slow as it is quite a different way of approaching the peer review process than people are used to.

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Our initiative has led to a large database with researchers prepared to review for pay and we are now discussing the system with publishers. We hope within not too long a time to start some pilots, but given that it involves a complete new way of peer reviewing it may take years before this transition is completed. Changing a system that has existed for such a long time is not easy.

Judith: Thank you very much!

Please check out SciRev's [website](#)! You can also follow them on [Twitter](#) for regular updates.

References cited:

Anna Tsing. 2015. *The Mushroom at the End of the World. On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton University Press.

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