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Professors, please review! A call (back) to action

Opinion paper by Pieter de Wilde

Academic journals have a major problem: it is increasing hard to find reviewers. In my role as associate editor for a major international publication, I now regularly handle papers where I have to invite 20 to 25 people in order to get the two or three reviews needed to reach a decision. Many invitees decline the review request outright, without providing a reason why they do so. I am told some invitees even simply delete review requests and handle them as spam. Others do not even bother to decline and just wait for the system to time-out the request, letting authors and editors wait up to three weeks for nothing. Discussions with friends and colleagues shows that this is part of a trend. Senior academics are fully engaged with writing funding proposals, supervising research students, publishing their own work, and of course carrying their teaching and admin loads. Reviewing is a voluntary task, and hence is often pruned out of busy and overstretched workload schedules.

There is no denying that the paper review system is out of control. The focus on universities on publication track records for hiring new staff or promoting existing academics has led to an exponential growth in publications, preferably in highly ranked (Q1) journals. The advent of Large Language Models accelerates the number of submissions. Our journal now is on track to get 15000 submissions this year. I myself typically receive at least two or three review requests per day, with no show of slowing down. Sometimes the pressure is intense, with an invite followed by an (automated?) reminder only one or two days later. And indeed, the reviewing work is a service to academia, that mostly goes unpaid.

Yet if journal publications are to have any value at all, good peer review is critical. Reviews are essential to ensure the quality of published work. Reviews are needed to weed out papers that are not yet ready and need deep rework, and those that do not make a significant contribution to the field. Reviews should include constructive feedback, that helps authors realize which parts of their submission need further work and clarification, and which errors may need to be corrected. Editors alone cannot do this work; they rely on expert reviewers to help the process. And the best experts to help are the senior academics in the field. If these seniors all decline, the search continues at lower levels, and ultimately it may be junior PhD-students that review. At that point the level of expertise may not be sufficient to provide the quality assessment that is needed. Another problem is people who do accept to review, but then do a quick pass through one of the AI systems to quickly generate a half-baked report. Neither of these options is good. In the end, shouldn't it be the senior academics who are the gatekeepers of what is published, and what is not?

Some colleagues mention alternatives to the current system. One is the idea of introducing rewards for reviewers, either financial or in some other form. However, I do not see this happen, and even if it does, it would require significant funds to actually pay for senior academic time. An alternative thought is to just publish papers on the internet, without any quality review, and then let some sort of public vote decide on what is seen as relevant, and what is not. I am not convinced this is the path forward either. How will we sift through so much unchecked information, and can we hope for the same quality of publications without reviewer feedback? You can do that with an opinion paper like this piece itself, but that is not the same as disseminating a scientific work to the academic community. And the various Open Access routes (green, gold, diamond) all still include a peer review process, and do not have a mechanism to get around the large numbers of submissions and review requests.

Managing the large number of submissions to journals first of all hits the managing editors. They scan the incoming manuscripts, and desk-reject anything that is not worthy of a deeper review. In our case, this already deals with around 90% of submissions. The remainder is then handled by the wider editorial team, which checks what papers are actually sent out for review. This is a small section of the initial load. So what lands with you as review request is already a selected set. Even so, this number still is

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large and growing. I agree that one needs to be selective in which reviews to accept, and which not. The 'publication machine' will keep asking and asking, so you need to decide what you are willing to commit to. Yet if you supervise students who submit their own papers to the same journals, I assume that you expect constructive and quality reviews of their work. I assume that you get annoyed if the waiting time gets too long. And that you will not appreciate a rejection based on the fact that suitable reviewers cannot be found. If the system feels like mis-using you by asking too many reviews, then not doing any reviews at all simply places the burden on others and is not fair either. To make the system work, may we expect that for every paper you and your students submit, you will also at least review one paper from someone else?

Some suggestions to be selective in handling review requests, which I apply myself, are the following:

- Limit the journals you accept reviews from to a specific set that is most aligned with your research interests. Reviews for such journals will be more informative for yourself. If you only review for selected journals, you may at one point also ask to join the Editorial Board if you desire so, which may help your networking and scholarship status.
- Check the titles and abstracts of work you are asked to review for value to your own scholarship; many works are worth studying to stay on the forefront of our discipline. As expert, reviewing such papers help you stay on top of the state-of-the-art, which at least provides some value back to you.
- Set a maximum of reviews you are prepared to do per unit of time (week, month) and decline once you have committed. This is a very reasonable approach that most editors will fully respect.

And please, if you decide to decline a review, do this quickly so we can continue to search for other reviewers. A short, polite motivation is much appreciated. Even if it is just as simple as "already committed to my maximum number of reviews this month".

My bottom-line opinion is that senior academics should do some share of the reviewing work. I appreciate that one needs to find a balance with other tasks, and that probably means that you have to be selective in which requests you accept, and which you decline. But if you and your team publish, then please also do some reviews as well. Otherwise the system will either grind to a halt by papers remaining un-reviewed, or journals will stop having the required quality assurance that makes publishing in them worthwhile in the first place.

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