

Book Review: Peer Review, Research Integrity, and the Governance of Science: Practice, Theory, and Current Discussions

by Blog Admin

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*This book brings together leading academics from the United States, Europe, and China to discuss how peer review functions within Western society, and how Chinese institutions are developing their own models of peer review. Peer review today in the West is under considerable stress, with new demands being made on the process, leading to its restructuring and in some cases replacement as the means for governing science. At the same time, China is poised to take on a leading role in scientific and technical research. Yves Laberge finds that **Peer Review, Research Integrity, and the Governance of Science** is not only instructive, it will also delight scholars for its recognition of the everyday dynamics of academic life.*

Peer Review, Research Integrity, and the Governance of Science: Practice, Theory, and Current Discussions. Robert Frodeman, J. Britt Holbrook, Carl Mitcham, and Hong Xiaonan (Eds). People's Publishing House and Dalian University of Technology. 2012.

A hard-to-find volume of essays published in China, *Peer Review, Research Integrity, and the Governance of Science: Practice, Theory, and Current Discussions* is a book about the politics of publishing in academia, raising the question of whether peer-reviewing as a principle is fair or not. It is a bilingual Chinese-English book with 100 pages printed in Mandarin (mainly in the opening section, written by co-editor Hong Xiaonan, and the liaisons between chapters) while the remaining portions (more than 600 pages) are exclusively in English. This book's aim is to present, understand, and in some cases criticize and reconsider the peer-reviewing system in various contexts: for academic journals, grant proposals, and promotions in all disciplines (p. 53).



The fact that this scholarly book about fairness and integrity in research is edited by (mostly) U.S. scholars but published by a Chinese press should not mislead readers into believing that this is a boastful text seeking to bestow upon readers the 'correct' ways of science, knowledge or ethics. It is rather quite the opposite. Published by the Beijing Dalian University of Technology, this book is neither about Chinese academia nor about China; instead, this anthology gathers some of the most interesting texts about research policies in the Anglo-Saxon world, now available altogether for Chinese scholars. In fact, fair critiques abound in this reconsidering of the peer-reviewing process, which is not perfect and can sometimes imply "nepotism and sexism" (p. 54). And even back in an article from 1971, Harriet Zuckerman and sociologist Robert K. Merton quoted physicist Samuel Abraham Goudsmith while arguing that the double-blind peer-review process had its limitations: "Removing the name and affiliation of the author does not make a manuscript anonymous; a competent reviewer can tell at a glance where the work was done and by whom or under whose guidance" (p. 202). Among more recent essays, Professor Stanley Fish's article from 1988 brings a "Case Against Blind Submission", as its title indicates, challenges the double-blind process as used in the MLA network (p. 255).

This anthology includes some 30 texts from various authors, mainly U.S. academics, published during the last decade. Some of the texts gathered here were published elsewhere in various, sometimes lesser-known journals, although most scholars might consider them as new and undoubtedly useful, for example this excellent article by Professor Mario Biagioli titled “From book censorship to Academic Peer Review”, in which the author argues that “Like all mythologies, the public image of peer-review has a purpose: it provides a sense or order, almost a unifying principle, to an otherwise chaotic set of professional practices, institutions, and interests that make up one of the largest, most dispersed, and most unregulated enterprises in modern society” (p. 122).

Many essays rely on social epistemology and sociology of science (see for example J. Britt Holbrook’s engaging chapter, p. 328, and Steve Fuller’s excellent contribution on “A Theory in search of Best Practice”, p. 521.). “Beyond Blind Faith: Overcoming the Obstacles to Interdisciplinary Evaluation” lies among the most stimulating chapters, for which Michèle Lamont, Grégoire Mallard, and Joshua Guetzkow conducted more than 80 interviews of various scholars serving on funding panels in order to investigate how difficult it still is for interdisciplinary manuscripts to obtain fair evaluations, not only because not many scholars are experts in more than one discipline and capable of adopting interdisciplinary approaches, but also because interdisciplinary work itself is still perceived as “careless or misguided” (p. 417). The authors highlight how evaluators define a “good” and a “bad” proposal and how these criteria can change (or not) with interdisciplinary proposals (p. 425). Indeed, interdisciplinarity seems like a challenge for many evaluators who are nevertheless seen as experts in their field (see [The Oxford Handbook of Interdisciplinarity](#)).

While there is no conclusion from the co-editors, Steve Fuller’s final remarks could almost be used as such: “As it stands, all too often the scientific establishment uses peer-review to exclude radically alternative intellectual starting points” (p. 538). These manuscripts (perceived as deviant), sometimes appearing in non-academic publications and within less prestigious networks, cannot achieve the same standards and status as the élites do (p. 538). Elsewhere, Liv Langfeldt reminds us of an unknown scholar whose manuscript was refused by three academic journals between 1966 and 1967 before being published shortly afterwards; unexpectedly, this same paper scored its author, George Akerlof, the Nobel Prize in Economics in 2001 (p. 550). In sum, reading *Peer Review, Research Integrity, and the Governance of Science: Practice, Theory, and Current Discussions* is not only instructive, it will also delight scholars for its recognition of the everyday dynamics of academic life, as Pierre Bourdieu masterly conceptualised it in his classic book [Homo Academicus](#).

Despite a surprisingly high number of typos, this book should be seen as important, and not only for scholars in China. My main quibble about this book would be the lack of an index. Another problem is that authors’ names do not appear in the table of contents. Its readership should not be restricted only to scholars in the social sciences; researchers from all disciplines should be aware of these issues. Because it is so rare, university libraries should own this fundamental collection of essays about how scholars keep the impression that professors in faculties are ‘good’ academics only because their manuscripts are usually accepted within the peer-reviewing system.

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