

New forms of open peer review will allow academics to separate scholarly evaluation from academic journals.

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2013/08/20/libre-project-open-peer-review-perakakis/

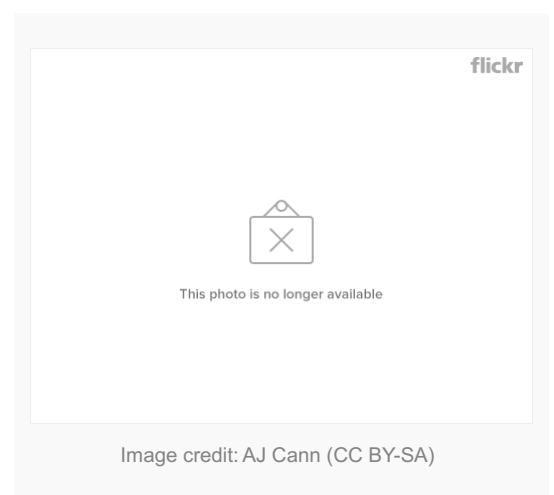
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Today's academic publishing system may be problematic, but many argue it is the only one available to provide adequate research evaluation. [Pandelis Perakakis](#) introduces an open community platform, LIBRE, which seeks to challenge the assumption that peer review can only be handled by journal editors. By embracing a new culture of open, transparent and independent research evaluation, the academic community can more productively contribute to global knowledge.



If you asked a commercial academic publisher what services they offer in exchange for their extortionate journal subscription rates, their reply would include a short list with administration of the peer review process featuring as the unique selling point. The publisher would be lucky for the conversation to end there, but an informed and insistent questioner would point out that peer reviews are performed by external academics providing their services for free, without even soliciting any meaningful academic recognition. To make life even easier for publishers, journal editors —also working for free— often ask authors to propose a list of recommended reviewers to effortlessly expand their database of potential academic helpers. As long as reviewers remain anonymous, no one can ever tell whether or not an editor intelligently selected suitable experts in the field, or simply invited the reviewers that authors suggested in their confidential cover letters.

Managing the peer review process costs publishers next to nothing and yet it is indeed the single most important element that supports their business model and protects their revenue stream. The logic is simple. Journals use a “rigorous” peer review process to build their prestige by [establishing high rejection rates](#) —despite the fact that today online publishing and electronic typesetting could actually increase publication slots and maintain higher acceptance rates at next to no cost. Academics need to publish in prestigious journals as a means to achieve recognition and secure tenure. In exchange, they are willing to give away the copyright of their articles and to offer their review services for free. Commercial publishers take advantage of the situation by including prestigious journals in “[Big Deal](#)” [subscription bundles](#) that are given to libraries as “all or nothing” offers.



Someone could argue that there is no problem with journals rejecting 95% of submitted articles, with academics spending their valuable time (mostly paid with public money) reformatting and resubmitting the same articles over and over again, and with publishers (adding close to zero value to the whole process) enjoying millions in profits at a time of global economic crisis when libraries around the world are being forced to cut down on subscription budgets. Even if someone were to have no objection to that, what is really profoundly problematic and ultimately unacceptable is that this whole enterprise is based on the economics of scarcity — customarily applied in the context of limited material resources where value is accrued from exclusivity. Knowledge, however, is a totally different fruit. Contrary to material goods, the more knowledge is freely shared, the more value it obtains. Quoting George Bernard Shaw:

If you have an apple and I have an apple and we exchange these apples then you and I will still each have one apple. But if you have an idea and I have an idea and we exchange these ideas, then each of us will have two ideas.

Today's academic publishing model treats knowledge—in the form of the academic article—as a material good. Instead of collaborating to shape new scientific ideas and communicate them to the research community and the public in general, scholars are forced to compete for a limited number of prestigious publication slots. As a result, science advances slower and less efficiently than it should, and young researchers entering their fields with a genuine aspiration to contribute to global knowledge are soon confronted with the ruthless “publish or perish” reality. And this is something humanity cannot accept.

Publishers, journals and academics are stuck in a vicious circle with the current academic publishing model threatening [to stagnate the flow of knowledge](#). This circle can be broken at any moment by any one of its main key players. Publishers could charge prices according to the real value they add to the process. Journals could start to care less about their prestige and increase their acceptance rates—something that can easily be accomplished without loosening their quality standards. The academic community could gain control of scholarly evaluation and communication. Time will tell which of these possibilities is the more probable. The oxymoron, however, is that in this game academics like ourselves hold both the fruit and the basket. We create the product and we certify it. Yet, we are the ones benefiting least from the “market”. We argue, that it would take as little as simply realising the power in our hands to change the entire landscape in favour of science and society. The key *is* peer review.

According to its advocates, the current research evaluation system may be problematic, but is the only practical one available. Indeed, many [alternative peer review models](#) have been proposed, but they all assume that “*peer review has to remain under the control of academic journals*”. Perhaps the time has come to challenge this assumption. No one would deny that what scientists do best is challenge world views and investigate viable alternatives. This, after all, is what has driven knowledge forward through feudal times and the Dark Ages to the Enlightenment.

The [LIBRE \(LIBerating REsearch\) Project](#) developed by [Open Scholar C.I.C.](#)—a not-for-profit organisation supported by a growing, *open* community—is one such alternative. LIBRE challenges the fundamental assumption that peer review can only be arranged and handled by journal editors. It is a free, multi-disciplinary platform that allows academic authors to invite expert peers to formally review their work. Full-text reviews are linked to the original manuscripts and the identities of both the authors and the reviewer are disclosed from the beginning of the review process. This open and transparent procedure permits direct communication and collaboration between authors and reviewers during all stages of the review. Reviewers help authors improve their manuscripts and receive recognition for their contribution as their reports are licensed and receive their own digital object identifier (DOI) to become citable items. In a further iteration, reviews themselves are also openly evaluated by other academics, providing incentives for thorough and helpful critiques, and protecting the system from potential sources of bias.

LIBRE can be thought of as an innovative experiment designed to test whether or not the academic community is ready to adopt a direct, open, independent and transparent evaluation scheme to certify the fruits of its own labour. By entrusting the handling of peer review to authors themselves, LIBRE eliminates all costs related to the research evaluation process setting it free of financial firewalls. It is our hope that the LIBRE project will encourage the spawning of other similar platforms and “green” open access repositories embracing our [author-guided peer review model](#). Academic journals can then concentrate on the important role of soliciting and selecting verified and high quality open access scientific articles and disseminating them to specific audiences and communities.

The online platform, which will be officially launched in October 2013, was developed with the help of research grants and its maintenance depends on a great deal of voluntary work by dedicated members and minimum funding for technical support and promotion expenses. Consistent with Open Scholar's asset lock, all further funding from foundations, grants or donations will be directly invested in the continued development and promotion of the project. The ultimate success of LIBRE depends on the preparedness of our academic community to embrace a new culture of open, transparent and independent research evaluation in order to break itself free from commercial interests unrelated to the true pursuit of knowledge.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the

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About the Author

Pandelis Perakakis is a clinical psychophysiologicalist currently doing postdoctoral research in Experimental Economics. He is an active advocate of Green Open Access and proponent of a new research evaluation model termed “Author-guided Peer Review”. In 2012, together with physicist Michael Taylor and Biologist Varvara Trachana, he co-founded Open Scholar C.I.C. with the vision to promote a new culture of openness and transparency in scholarly communication. Follow the LIBRE Project on Twitter: [@libreapp](#)

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