

A modest proposal to solve the problem of peer review: Treat evaluation as an in-house publishing function.

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Peer review is under constant scrutiny due to its failure to adapt to a more effective model in the digital age.

Steve Fuller argues that academic evaluation proceeds much too slowly for the quite simple reason that academics are valued mainly for being productive and not evaluative. It may be the job of publishers to rescue the academic brand – from academia itself — by hiring peer reviewers directly. To ensure quality control in academic knowledge production, peer review may need to be internalised as a regular publishing cost.



Suppose you're an executive at a transnational academic publishing firm struggling with the problem of getting academics to referee articles for publication. Your starting assumption so far has been that academics should be willing to do this for free because they realize that their credibility relies on their mutual policing practices, aka 'peer review'. So your policy has been not to pay them anything – or at least not anything substantial (e.g. the 30-day free access to journals that their universities already supply for free).

But the strategy doesn't seem to work. Academics either refuse to referee outright or they accept the task but then turn in the report well beyond the deadline, as if they know that you have no alternative. And they're right. Meanwhile academics are increasingly taking refuge in 'open source' internet-based platforms that appear to operate with minimal overhead yet profess some measure of peer review. The net result is a haemorrhaging of your core client base. What to do?

The solution is pretty simple, really. Treat peer reviewing as an in-house publishing function, on the model of the R&D division of the modern corporation. The only reason why no one has proposed this is that the 'lean and mean' postmodern corporation sheds its R&D division and outsources innovation to universities who, faced with their own crisis of legitimation, gladly do capital's bidding in a way that saves firms money while making themselves look 'relevant'.

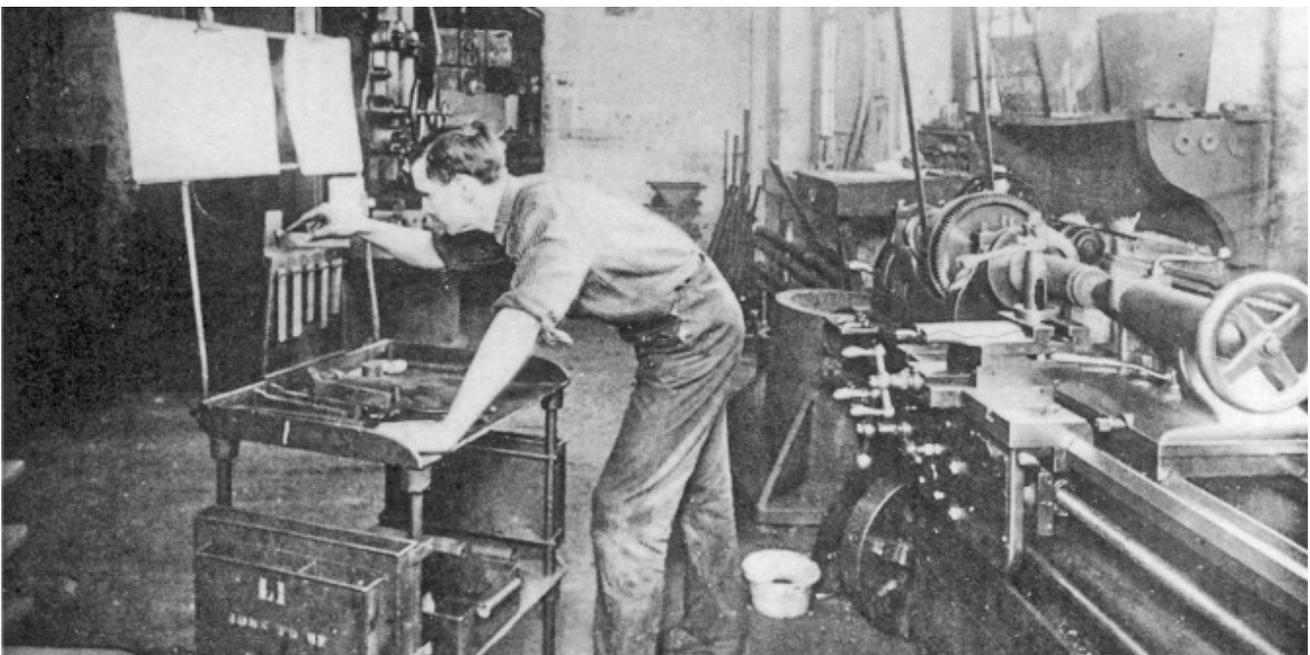


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This postmodern strategy of managing the *production* of knowledge may well prove a ‘win-win’ strategy for the corporate and academic worlds in our neo-liberal system, but it cannot be generalised to the *evaluation* of knowledge. Neo-liberalism depends on clear market signals, not least in the knowledge market. Not only must these signals be reliable but they must also match the pulse of the market. From this standpoint, academic evaluation proceeds much too slowly for the quite simple reason that academics are valued mainly for being productive and not evaluative.

You cannot get a professorship simply on the basis of vast connoisseurship of the scientific literature, which enables you to spot frauds, fallacies, prospects and brilliance at a glance. People who spend more time reading than writing tend not to meet the threshold of chair-worthiness. Nevertheless, it is precisely such people who uphold the distinctiveness of the ‘academic’ brand of knowledge production. In that case, it may be the job of publishers to rescue the academic brand – from academia itself — by hiring these people on a part- or full-time basis. In strict economic terms, to ensure quality control in academic knowledge production, peer review may need to be internalised as a regular publishing cost.

It would be hard to see how universities could object to this policy, as they provide little if any incentive for academics to become involved in the evaluation of their peers’ work. From a neo-liberal perspective, the development would be easily explained. It simply marks a segmentation of the knowledge market: On the one hand, universities appear ill-equipped to support activities surrounding research evaluation; on the other, academic publishers have an interest in promoting the value of academic research. A match made in heaven, right?

If this scenario comes to pass – which is entirely possible – it will be because academia has failed to play its hand properly in the neo-liberal game. Neo-liberal policy makers already know that much truly innovative knowledge isn’t – and never has been — produced in universities. Nevertheless, they have usually expected universities to provide the testing ground or selection mechanism for these various ideas and schemes, to see which merit more widespread distribution. But if universities fail to step up to the plate, perhaps because they overestimate the value of sheer knowledge production, then it is only reasonable that publishers – whose own viability is directly affected by problems in academic quality control – take matters into their own hands and encourage universities to outsource their evaluative functions to them. In any case, a market should be created for knowledge connoisseurs, and in today’s world publishers are in the best position to do it.

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

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