

Not all academics are comfortable with the idea of open peer review



*There are many arguments in favour of open peer review, from anticipated improvements to the speed and quality of reviews brought about by the greater accountability, through to the likely reduction in unfair or illogical decisions because of the system's transparency. Despite this, not all academics are comfortable with open peer review and remain fearful of their comments and views being subject to public scrutiny. **Jaime A. Teixeira da Silva** argues this may prevent the open review system from being truly inclusive, and may even result in a similar situation to now, where limited groups of people undertake a large proportion of reviews.*

Who does the academic literature benefit? The published literature primarily serves the academic corps of higher education institutions and academic societies, but science and knowledge have always benefitted wider society too. A core argument of the open science movement is that academic papers, as well as academics themselves, should be held accountable to, and by, other academics and society, especially where research is publicly funded. To make this shift towards more “open” (i.e. transparent and accountable) science requires a change both in mentality and infrastructure. Such a view is also often supported by the [science watchdogs](#) who document the rise of the “fake” in [academia](#). And the same is said of the peer review system too; there are some who advocate the total replacement of traditional peer review by the open peer review (OPR) model, while a more conservative view is that open can complement the traditional mode, which tends to be single- or double-blind .

In principle, and at first glance, OPR gives the impression of being a silver bullet to fix the [problems and failures of traditional peer review](#). Three arguments could support this view. Firstly, academics who serve as peer reviewers under OPR will have to complete peer reviews extremely carefully, as their opinions and recommendations will be judged openly by an audience beyond just the journal editor or paper's authors. As a result, it can be argued that the quality of peer review might increase because more care is being taken. Secondly, under OPR, a peer's recommendation to publish or reject, as well as the amount of edits needed for each round of reviews, make the peer reviewer accountable for not only approving a study, but also for giving advice and approving the final paper that is published. Thirdly, the speed of [peer review can sometimes be frustratingly lethargic](#), while [desk rejections](#) which might be perceived to be unfair are rarely able to be challenged under the traditional model. It is often [difficult to hold peers and editors accountable](#) for such lethargy or for perceived unfair or illogical decisions to reject. OPR would not only speed up the peer review process, but would allow authors to challenge the power of the traditional editorial status quo by openly questioning peer reviewers' requests or decisions if they felt them to be unfair or excessive. Such challenges are rare under traditional models. OPR is thus, as a result of these three positive qualities, able to empower [authors whose rights are increasingly being frayed](#).

If such powerfully positive aspects of OPR exist, what's the problem? As [I recently argued](#), the risks do not lie with the concept of OPR itself, but with its implementation and perception. Demands for greater openness and transparency may appear positive, but in practice may cause some academics greater stress and anxiety. [Not all peer reviewers are equally qualified](#) nor are all of them native English speakers. Those who might wish to comment on an article but fear retaliation or shaming for their relative lack of skills or language-based abilities will likely not become part of the open peer reviewer pool. Not all academics wish their identities to be known. Not all academics wish to be subjected to public criticism or risk ridicule. Not all academics wish to support the open science movement. And there may be academics who simply do not wish to participate in OPR for reasons not listed here. When one peels away this potentially large pool of academics who might not wish to participate in OPR for whatever reason, what is left is a rather exclusive or “elite” set of peer reviewers with a high-quality skillset. This places a limit on the range of individuals who are available to offer input and approve work for publication, and may, ironically, create a status quo of OPR participants and respondents that is not truly inclusive; one that mirrors, to some extent, the current, often exclusionary traditional peer review system. It might also create something akin to a peer review arms race, in which peers clamour for recognition, further [commodifying peer review](#).

Moreover, not all journals wish to participate. Not all journals who claim to conduct OPR make it obligatory for all papers, or some make it [optional](#), such as [PeerJ](#). Merely making the option available arguably defeats the purpose of open peer review as it represents a diluted or qualified commitment to transparency. Also, this serves to establish a two-tier system of those authors who are willing to participate and who seek transparency, and those who do not and so may be perceived or even stigmatised as “untransparent” or opaque, even though they might not necessarily be so. Furthermore, not all journals or publishers have a system that is built for [post-publication peer review critique and correction](#). And not all publishers to have tested OPR, such as [Elsevier](#), have [found it to be successful](#). And will OPR truly reduce the time it takes for a paper to be [published](#)?

These are issues that proponents of OPR might consider during this [Peer Review Week 2018](#).

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About the author

[Jaime A. Teixeira da Silva](#) is a retired and independent scientist with a wide background in plant science and with an equally wide interest in publishing-related topics.