

A privilege, a gift, and a reason for gratitude: appreciating the human dimension of peer review



*The shortcomings of the peer review process are well-documented, with it being variously described as too slow, conservative, and even unkind. But amidst fevered discussion of its logistical merits, the inherent humanistic value of peer review is often overlooked. **Keren Dali** and **Paul T. Jaeger** encourage reviewers to remember that each peer review opportunity offers an incredible human experience of learning and sharing. At its best, the peer review process brings together authors, editors, and reviewers through an inspiring and resourceful environment which fosters creativity, authorial confidence, and scientific progress.*

Over the past two years, the discourse in this blog has offered many perspectives on peer review as a flawed system. It has been deemed a [threat to mental health](#), a [barrier to scientific progress](#), and a task that [reviewers are unprepared for](#), among others. The writers also invariably find the process [too slow](#). Even the [rare defender of peer review](#) feels compelled to start their defence by noting “the many good reasons for arguing the peer review process is broken”. This criticism is not new; calls for disbanding the peer review process across disciplines abound (e.g. [Gould, 2013](#); [Lamont, 2009](#); [Shatz, 2004](#)).

To be sure, a lot can go wrong in peer review; this is not in dispute. Yet we would like to suggest that the greatest value thereof is sadly (and regularly) overlooked. Distilling the arguments from [our larger paper](#), we invite Impact Blog readers to shift their views of peer review from that of an (un)necessary evil to that of a binding humanistic thread in our scholarly community.

We will admit investment in the system; between us, we currently hold four editor or associate editor positions in journals and book series. However, we are also actively published authors and know first-hand the impact of hurtful and unsubstantiated reviews. For us, having our work under peer review is a perpetual state. This combined perspective gives us a unique opportunity for reflection not just on improving the process but also on its inherent humanistic value. The latter is often disregarded in favour of the more analytical and logistical merits of peer review.

For example, few will probably object to the need for the quality assurance of research findings in today’s situation, whereby the navigable web serves up easily findable but barely reliable information to the many people who lack the knowledge or training to vet it for accuracy. Not only is there a cacophony of voices — some authoritative, others masquerading as such — there are also numerous non-traditional venues (e.g. personal websites, online repositories, blogs, and forums) that researchers have embraced to disseminate their findings faster, while bypassing peer review. Under the circumstances, ensuring the quality of research and presenting it in a way that clearly conveys scholarly rigour has never been more important.

However, we will probably have less support for our contention that there is also merit to slowness. This is where we need to stop and address what slowness means exactly. Not the months of reviewers’ procrastination that kills researchers’ mojo and the relevance of their studies, but the slowness of taking the time — for expert reflection and meaningful feedback. We do not defend those who allow papers under review to collect dust and drown in oblivion, but we similarly do not support the view that peer review should work as social media — give it a “thumbs-up” and hit the “publish” button. The lightning speed of approval through “likes” and retweets is based on impression, not reflection, and although first impressions are sometimes correct, it may be an infatuation, not a true love.



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And here is the crux of the matter – a point not shared by many. Peer reviewing is routinely defined as a service duty. This often gives it an undertone of burden and imposition, even if it makes us feel important, respected, and useful. But what if we removed our professional hats for a second and looked at this process not as an obligation but as an intellectual conversation? We regularly engage in such conversations in person and online in many different contexts. Although in these conversations, we know with whom we are talking, while in peer review our conversation partners remain unknown to us, it does not change the value of the exchange. We get so wrapped up in playing the roles of reviewers, professors, advisors, researchers, and critics that we miss an incredible human experience in every peer review opportunity: the experience of learning and sharing. We are so subdued by the downer image of duty and obligation that we can't seem to see peer review for what it is: a privilege and a gift. Let's just stop the reflexive griping and think about it for a moment: we are given a chance to take an early look into new ideas in our fields and an opportunity to be among the first ones who learn about a great insight or discovery. Even when they don't include an earth-shattering revelation, most papers will still offer reviewers the chance to reflect on their own beliefs and approaches and to learn something new. Such opportunities are one of the greatest benefits of peer review. This is "a gift that we neither asked for nor dreamed of but that came to us nonetheless by virtue of our hard work, academic stature, and expertise"; we believe, this is "[a reason for gratitude, not for lament](#)".

Many things could help us reconsider the rhetoric of peer review and to adopt an inspiring view thereof. One of them is looking at peer review through the lens of the humanistic pedagogical principles developed by Carl and Natalie Rogers: empathy, unconditional positive regard, the realness of reviewers, psychological safety, psychological freedom, and opportunity for challenging intellectual experiences ([Corey, 2009](#); [Rogers, 1969](#)). To be sure, peer review is simultaneously teaching and mentoring, but both can be delivered in different ways. Carrot and stick could be one of them. The Rogerian humanistic approach could be another. To apply Rogerian pedagogy in peer review, we need to realise that a peer-review interaction should grow beyond the gracious "[opportunity to teach](#)" into a grateful realisation of the privilege to learn from reading and reviewing new manuscripts. Perhaps, some of them — those awkward and rushed — remind us of our junior selves, while others — brilliant and utterly original — fill us with joy that we are part of groundbreaking scholarship. Either way, an appreciative and graceful approach to reviewing invariably elicits a human moment from us. For editors, the privilege and reward are double: by virtue of exposure to a wealth of ideas, we turn into erudite and interesting people, broadly informed and ahead of the intellectual curve. All this without making an extra effort and thanks to the dozens of experienced and junior authors who trust us with their most precious intellectual possessions.

Reviewers and editors who follow the Rogerses will not turn the publishing process into a power play, exercise self-importance, or crush authors' dreams. They will critique and mentor with kindness, and their work will have all the ingredients of a helpful review process: evidence that the reviewer has considered a paper in its entirety; evidence that the review was approached as a chance to teach and be supportive of a fellow scholar; an acknowledgement that the review was a valuable educational opportunity for the reviewer; the presence of relevant, specific, substantiated, constructive, and actionable comments; or a collegial suggestion of alternative publication venues. Conversely, the Rogerian approach is [an antidote to meanness and unscrupulousness in reviewing](#), a remedy to those who pass judgement on submitted manuscripts without reading them; who impose their own methodological parameters or unwarranted stylistic restrictions on authors' expression; who embark on reviewing manuscripts that they are not qualified to review; and who engage in unsubstantiated and hurtful criticism.

A Rogerian way is an approach to the review process that is not only fair but also humanistic to the core. At its best, it brings together authors, editors, and reviewers through an inspiring and resourceful environment which fosters creativity, authorial confidence, and scientific progress.

*This blog post is based on the authors' article, "[Beyond Scholarly Publishing: The Human Dimension of Peer Review in LIS](#)", published in *The Library Quarterly* (DOI: 10.1086/696578).*

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the LSE Impact 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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