Open-Source Peer Reviews: A Paradigm Shift in Academic Publishing

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**ABSTRACT**

Recent studies of peer review underscore that some facets of accepted evaluation methods have serious flaws. Assessments are often burdened by protectionist inclinations against new ideas, unstable editorial demographics, affiliational biases, and occasionally unethical and/or corrupt protocols, or the avoidance of protocols put in place to restrain biases. This article examines a solution to these dilemmas: the open-source peer review. This emerging evaluation system allows the readers of a journal to offer feedback on submissions before they are officially sanctioned by a publication. Thus, the concept allows journal-readers (who are conceivably experts, like the editors) to decide or make recommendations on which articles are appropriate to continue with further revisions and/or to publish. The concept promises to offer a more democratically and demographically stable evaluation system, one that has the potential to avoid some of the problems that are inherent to traditional scholarly reviews.

Scientific innovation frequently exceeds the pace of social development, and established cultural institutions often experience a period of upheaval during the integration of new technologies. Until recently, the cost of printing and distributing hardcopy texts might have warranted the traditional academic peer-review process, whereby a small group makes editorial decisions for journals that have thousands of readers. The procedures that systematise these publications suffer from technological lag, as advances in electronic communications have precluded the necessity of this conventional evaluation method. Today, traditional peer-review procedures have become obsolete, a circumstance that calls for a re-conceptualisation of the academic publication process.
Academic disciplines are organised around a set of procedures that regulate how knowledge may be developed and disseminated. The publication process is an important pillar in this system, and its practices generally sanction what may be considered meritorious concepts in academic disciplines. Notions of what constitutes academic merit are dependent upon the way these disciplines are structured. Like other forms of power within cultural communities, the academic publishing process (i.e. peer review) is often perceived as a stable phenomenon. However, empirical studies of peer review underscore that some facets of accepted evaluation methods have serious flaws. Assessments are often burdened by protectionist inclinations against new ideas, unstable editorial demographics, and occasionally unethical and/or corrupt protocols, or the avoidance of protocols that might restrain bias. This article examines a solution to these dilemmas: the open-source peer review. This emerging evaluation system allows the readers of a journal to offer feedback on submissions before they are sanctioned to be printed by a publication. Open-source reviews of this kind allow journal readers (who are conceivably experts, like the editors) to decide or make recommendations on which articles are appropriate to approve for publication (with or without further revisions). The concept promises to be a more democratically and demographically stable evaluation system, one that has the potential to avoid some of the problems that are inherent to traditional scholarly reviews.

A short history of peer review

Peer review exists to systematise knowledge, to maintain scholarly standards, and to lend credibility to ideas. The contemporary concept of peer review has historical precedents that date to the seventeenth century. The Royal Society of London passed a resolution in December 1663 that stated ‘[n]o book [shall] be printed by order of the council, which hath not been perused and considered by two of the council, who shall report, that such book contains nothing but what is suitable to the design and work of the society’ (quoted in Biagioli 21). These initial forays into what would come to be known as peer review were geared more toward censorship than knowledge production; as Mario Biagioli observed: ‘the review was about making sure that a text did not make unacceptable claims rather than to certify that it made good claims’ (23).

Scholarly societies slowly transitioned to a more scientific form of peer review, one that involved appraisals of the material in the texts.
A watershed moment in this shift occurred in 1731, when the evaluation of manuscripts by readers other than the editor was implemented by the Royal Society of Edinburgh. Nevertheless, Kathleen Fitzpatrick has observed that these early evaluations followed very different mechanisms from contemporary practises: '[e]arly peer review in scientific journal publishing was meant to augment editorial expertise rather than to exercise more conventionally understood modes of quality control' (Planned Obsolescence 12). Thus, while academic reviews have their origins in state censorship, the initial progression toward external readers was intended to enhance the authority of the editor, not necessarily the quality of the scholarship in the journal. Fitzpatrick continues:

Given those two disruptions in our contemporary notions about the purposes of peer review, it may be less surprising to find that the mode of formalized review that we now value in the academy seems not to have become a universal part of the scientific method, and thus of the scholarly publishing process, until as late as the middle of the twentieth century. (Planned Obsolescence 12)

Indeed, while the present system of peer review is often venerated as a long-established custom, external readings were not a widespread practice in many fields until the 1970s (Michaels 220-25). Daniel Kennefick has observed that just one of Albert Einstein’s papers was likely to have been peer reviewed during his career (43). Science and The Journal of the American Medical Association were comparatively early players, sending manuscripts to outside reviewers in the 1940s, and Nature, arguably the most influential journal in biological sciences, did not establish outside peer reviews until 1967.

Why did peer review take its present form so recently?

A confluence of several factors caused peer reviewing to emerge in its present structure in the mid-to-late twentieth century. First, there was a significant increase in the number of people attending institutions of higher education, becoming scientists, and thus submitting papers for publication. This phenomenon was accompanied by a shift toward increasing specialisation in many fields, a development that obliged the

1. For a history of this process see especially Burnham 1323-29 and Spier ‘The History of the Peer-reviewed Process’ 357-58.
2. For the history of Nature’s publication procedures, see Higgs, ‘History of the Journal Nature’.

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editors to seek outside opinions in order to avoid taking uninformed decisions on topics outside their expertise. Probably the most important factor in the rise of the present system of peer review was the development of technologies that facilitated the production of texts (typewriters and carbons, and later, digital word processing) and their reproduction (photocopiers, fax machines, scanners, and later, digitisation). These dynamics greatly increased the number of papers being written and submitted, and the workload for journal editors increased accordingly.

It is likely that the copying machine, which became widely available in the 1960s, was a chief catalyst in the emergence of widespread external reviews. Once a text itself became reproducible at a negligible cost, the ease of acquiring informed opinions about it also grew dramatically. The limits of peer review in the Xerox-age (from which we are just now emerging) were linked to print and postage costs, and the interval of time required to receive packages by mail. These material circumstances became normalised into a process in which a submission was to be reviewed by a small number of readers before publication.

Contemporary peer review and its problems

Since its inception, peer review has met widespread criticism: from problems related to fraudulent research to vengeful and unscrupulous editors, the problems surrounding the judgment of the ‘quality’ of potential publications have been significant. The opinions of journal editors are particularly important in this discussion, as they have insider status on peer-review procedures. Richard Horton, editor of The Lancet, a British medical journal, observed:

Editors and scientists alike insist on the pivotal importance of peer review. We portray peer review to the public as a quasi-sacred process that helps to make science our most objective truth teller. But we know that the system of peer review is biased, unjust, unaccountable, incomplete, easily fixed, often insulting, usually ignorant, occasionally foolish, and frequently wrong. (148-49)

Another serious problem with traditional peer review is its intrinsic demographic imbalances. The referee and editor selection process is often based on nondemocratic appointments – making it thus a procedure that is not essentially representative of a publication’s readership. As the survey below makes clear, the editorial teams at top-ranked Humanities
journals in the United States are heavily slanted toward elite institutions. According to the $h$-index ranking\(^3\), the top journals in American Literary Studies are *PMLA, American Literary History, New Literary History, English Language Notes*\(^4\).

Of the 147 editors/reviewers who are listed by these journals, only four (2\%) are affiliated with non-PhD-granting institutions; yet, non-PhD-granting schools comprise 96\% of higher education institutions in the United States. 81\% of readers/editors are affiliated with an institution in the top 12\% of in *US News and World Report* rankings of English Departments at PhD-granting universities. The journals do not have a single editor or reader listed who is affiliated with a PhD-granting institution in the United States that is outside the top 50\% of the same rankings. There are no faculty from Community Colleges or institutions with non-competitive enrolments. There are no editors/reviewers listed from Hispanic-Serving institutions or institutions with high minority enrolment. Moreover, as top journals are generally funded by and housed at elite universities, scholars at mid and low-tier institutions are subordinated *de facto* in this system due to their lack of collegial and social contact with those who select potential referees and editors\(^5\).

The belief that the present undemocratic and non-representative editorial norms are the best way to disseminate knowledge hinges on the idea that editors/reviewers deserve the situations of power that they occupy; that idea is constrained by a binary valuation of scholars in the academic community: person ‘A’ (the editor/reviewer) is inherently more qualified, competent, and authorised to make decisions about a text than people ‘B-Z’ (the readers). Contemporary publication practices are thus constrained by an imaginary and, one could argue, unsubstantiated superiority that editors/reviewers supposedly wield (in comparison to their readerships).

Moreover, the myths of academic hierarchy suggest that individuals with elite affiliation achieved such status through talent and intrinsic potential, factors external to the social, cultural and economic circumstances that often authorise their selection over other candidates

\(^3\)The $h$-index (Hirsch index) is a commonly used measure of scholarly productivity and impact. It is used to form judgements about the quality of journals and about the work of individual scholars.

\(^4\)These same five publications also appear at or near the top of the rankings prepared by the ESF Standing Committee for the Humanities as well as the ScImago system.

\(^5\)An exhaustive list of the affiliations of these editorial teams is provided in Appendix A.
(at the student, professor and editorial levels). The selection of readers and editors – in the Humanistic fields, certainly – should result in a representative demographic sample, as no one group (linguistic, cultural, educational, socioeconomic and so on) should claim authority over the editorial analysis of literature. ‘American Literary Studies’ is a subfield that is present in every PhD- and non-PhD-granting institutions in the United States, yet the perceptions of ‘quality’ scholarship are limited to editors in stations of the academy that are not generally representative of the field as a whole.

In general the concept of ranking potential editors/reviewers by one’s perceived merit in relation to a pool of others who have equal qualifications is tied to models of evaluation that some scholars are inherently superior to others. The problem with these practices, as established as they are, is that Humanistic disciplines are generally resistant to the concept that one analysis of the human condition may be inherently superior than any other. When a system hinges on myths like ‘quality’ to select certain candidates over others, and the metric coincides with a person’s profile, valuation problems exist. In short, the editorial positions in humanities should be representative of the field as a whole, not any one group of scholars within it.

There are many other demographic groups – in addition to those with non-elite affiliations – who are marginalised by the present system of editorial authority. Such groups suffer from restrictions on access to the social spaces within which connections to influential journals can be established – events such as conferences. This state of affairs is detrimental to the quality of scholarly publications and a disservice to their readership. Humanistic subfields that treat cultural themes outside the mainstream of US academia (e.g. African Studies) are particularly affected by these restrictions. Latin American studies can be cited as a case example of this situation. Beyond the affiliational limits to receiving an invitation to a conference or other professional event where one might come into contact with those who appoint reviewers/editors; even when Latin American scholars enjoy calls to attend such events in the United States and Europe, their presence is sometimes impossible due to issues beyond their control.

Unlike Europeans, Canadians, Australians and New Zealanders (and the few other nations with visa waivers), every citizen of a Latin American nation (save Puerto Rico) requires a visa to be present in the United States legally. In order to receive a tourism/visiting visa to attend a
conference in the United States, one must travel to the US embassy or consulate for an interview in person. (Some nations do not have US embassies or consulates; in this case, applicants are required to travel to the nearest embassy, in another country, for the interview). The application costs $200.00, a fee that is not refunded when a visa is denied. The interviews last between 90 and 120 seconds. In a study of the visa adjudication that I carried out in Ecuador for the Fulbright Commission in 2012, scholars who intended to attend conferences in the United States described their interview experiences as: ‘traumatic’, ‘belittling’ and ‘dehumanising’ (among other similar terms). At some United States consulates and embassies, over 90% of visit-visa applications are rejected. The circumstances are very similar when a Latin American scholar attempts to attend professional meetings in Europe, due to the equally discriminatory Schengen Agreement, which requires a similar interview process.

Scholars in Quito, Caracas, or elsewhere – academics who have the same qualifications and scholarly backgrounds as the European and American journal editors – would have made the same connections at these professional meetings had they able to attend; yet, they often cannot because of their geopolitical situation. Due in part to the fact that Latin Americans are rarely able to attend conferences in their fields in the United States or Europe, there are some very strange editorial demographics in publications that specialise in Latin American Studies. The the top five publications according to the $h$-index, have almost no editors affiliated with Latin American institutions. The following list gives the total number of editors on the committees of these publications, with the number of editors from Latin American institutions in brackets:

- *Latin American Perspectives*: 26 editors (0);
- *Latin American Politics and Society*: 29 editors (3);
- *Journal of Latin American Studies*: 7 editors (0);
- *Latin American Research Review*: 29 editors (7);
- *Bulletin of Latin American Research*: 18 editors (0).

Héctor Huyke, professor at the University of Puerto Rico, has said this about Latin American academics in the United States and Europe: ‘[n]o tienen voz. Por eso sus ideas no cuentan.’ (They have no voice. For that, ideas are unimportant.)

Open-source reviews would open the dialogue in each discipline to those who have been excluded due to their demographic situation. In this way, the present editorial norm – slanted toward scholars with certain elite
affiliations and/or national backgrounds – is a toxic one, particularly in the Humanities, as even in the case of blind submissions, texts are evaluated through this non-representative register; readings are concomitantly informed by entrenched interests, approaches, and agendas (often unconscious to the editors/referees themselves) that are common to that demographic group⁶.

Affiliation, protectionism and personalities

Perhaps due to the subjective nature of Humanistic scholarship, the contemporary peer-review system in the Humanities might be more seriously flawed than in the hard sciences. Several scholars have examined the close correlation between the affiliation of an author and the perceived significance of his or her Humanistic research. Mary J. Davis is a professor at the University of Kentucky. In the 1990s she sent a piece to fifty journals; all rejected it. During her stint as visiting instructor at the College of William and Mary, Davis sent the same text for review on the new letterhead and had several offers to publish. Similarly, a professor at the University of Chicago-Kent, James Lindgren, while a visiting affiliate at the University of Chicago, sent out an article that had been rejected on the stationery of his home institution. This time, the same article was accepted by several notable publications, including top journals housed at the University of Pennsylvania and Northwestern University⁷.

In How Professors Think, Michèle Lamont also examined how affiliation can shape a reviewer’s perception of the text being assessed. Her work involved anonymous comments from elite scholars serving on several of the top funding panels for grants in the United States, and the results demonstrated the enormous symbolic power of certain institutions. One scholar noted that ‘[p]eople from Harvard get no advice of any kind […] [other institutions] have to submit draft after draft and they get all these comments’ (quoted in Lamont 227). Another referee quoted by Lamont remarks on his or her preference for work from the University of Pennsylvania: ‘Penn is very highly regarded […] This is a [proposal] that if she had been at some tiny little hole-in-the-wall college, it’s not likely [to have been funded]’ (quoted in Lamont 227).

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⁶. Needless to say the overrepresentation of referees from other demographic groups would be tainted by similar concerns.
⁷. These experiences are related in Subotnik & Lazar 54-72.

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In *Peer Review: A Critical Inquiry*, David Shatz describes a study in which ‘papers that had been published in journals by authors from prestigious institutions were [...] resubmitted with a non-prestigious affiliation indicated for the author. Not only did referees mostly fail to recognise these previously published papers in their field, they recommended rejection’ (2). Shatz’s report demonstrates how traditional peer review opposes work that goes against ‘mainstream’ ideas; how reviewers are biased toward the perceived value of an author’s affiliation; how reviewers tend to be critical of studies that contradict their own publications and lenient towards those that accord with them; how referees are commonly not ‘conversant with the published literature’ in fields they review; and how they have, according to Shatz, serious ‘bias[es] toward papers that affirm their prior convictions’ (2). A principal conclusion in his work is that ‘[r]eferees are biased against innovation and/or are poor judges of quality’ (2). Richard Delgado has expressed a similar opinion. As he bluntly put it: ‘[m]erit is that which I, the pre-existing situated self, use to judge you, the Other. The criteria I use sound suspiciously like me and the place where I stand’ (quoted in Subotnik & Lazar 57).

The questionable processes that occur in peer review are not limited to the ideas and affiliations themselves, and often transcend academics entirely. As Robert Higgs describes,

>[p]ersonal vendettas, ideological conflicts, professional jealousies, methodological disagreements, sheer self-promotion, and a great deal of plain incompetence and irresponsibility are no strangers to the publishing world; indeed, that world is rife with these all-too-human attributes. In no event can peer review ensure that research is correct in its procedures or its conclusions’. (*Peer Review* 1)

Indeed, the concept that ‘only the best work makes it into circulation’, as Kathleen Fitzpatrick has noted, is very much ‘a debatable assumption’ (*Peer-to-Peer Review* 126).

Double-blind reviews have been introduced to quell some of these issues. Such policies have been met with disdain – and virtually all dissenting voices have been from elite places. Stanley Fish, an associate at Columbia, Berkeley, Duke and The New York Times, for one, believes that his affiliations should anoint his work above that of others. In his ‘No Bias, No Merit: The Case Against Blind Submission’, he states: ‘[I] don’t see why others shouldn’t labor in the vineyards as I did’ (quoted in Di Leo 8).
Annette Markus, editor of *Nature Neuroscience*, is also against blind review; she believes that ‘most reviewers would find it easy to guess the authors of a manuscript before them. After all, before you submit a paper to us, you have typically already presented a good part of the data to the community’ (‘Double Blind Peer Review?’ 1).

Some journals with double-blind procedures are only double-blind in name. *Hispania*, for instance, edited by Sheri Spaine Long, has the following protocol: ‘All articles submitted to *Hispania* go through an anonymous peer review process in which neither the author nor the reviewer knows the other’s identity’ (‘Author Guidelines’ 4). Nevertheless, Long has an established record of making binding editorial decisions on submissions before they are reviewed. While Long maintains that she ‘believe[s] ardently in peer review, because it contributes to the quality of what we publish and to the development of scholars in our respective fields’ (‘Will Peer Review Still Function and How?’ 67); any text she reads and rejects before a double-blind review—despite the publication’s protocol—Long explains, is not expected to come back into the pipeline. Long’s stint at *Hispania* has been influenced by her take on the role of the editor in general: she believes editors should be ‘gatekeepers and canon creators’ (‘Curators of the Canon and the Classroom’ 1). While Long’s treatment of submissions disregards the journal protocol, she created a new section of the magazine for herself—called the “The Editor’s Message”—which is a personal space where she projects her own opinions; it is unclear if these “Messages” are peer-reviewed.\(^8\)

While Sheri Spaine Long’s regrettable take the role of the editor might have been commonplace a century ago, in any contemporary publishing process there is no quality review of the review itself. Furthermore, as Robert Higgs comments, ‘[a]ny journal editor who desires, for whatever reason, to reject a submission can easily do so by openly rejecting it or by choosing referees who he or she knows full well will knock it down; likewise, he can easily obtain favourable referee reports’ (‘Peer Review’ 1).

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8. Long’s words in ‘Curators of the Canon and the Classroom’ on the editorial control of knowledge were, incidentally, not peer reviewed.
Open-Source Peer Reviews

The field of Cultural Studies emerged in recent decades in large part to deal with the nefarious nature of social hierarchies and cultural power. In some cases, however, the field-elites in Cultural Studies can also be repressive in their publishing practices. Such is the case, for example, with *boundary 2*, a journal with the following mission statement:

The editors of *boundary 2* announce that they no longer intend to publish in the standard professional areas, but only materials that identify and analyze the tyrannies of thought and action spreading around the world and that suggest alternatives to these emerging configurations of power. To this end, we wish to inform our readers that, until further notice, the journal will not accept unsolicited manuscripts. (‘Submissions’ 1)

It is the duty of *boundary 2*, at least per this mission statement, to reject hegemonic and non-egalitarian structures; yet an invitation-only periodical censors the voices of scholars outside the social network of the editors. *boundary 2* is essentially closed to all ideas save those of the associates and acquaintances of its editorial team, as a result of its mission statement, meaning that the publication is not a ‘journal’ in a conventional sense but rather the academically-themed newsletter of a small and closed social circle.

The inherent problems with assessment of scholarship and knowledge go beyond open or closed submissions, and the anonymity of readers and editors. The scholarly referee process itself, for journals and monographs, is a remnant of a time when publications were textual (not digital) and the investment of printing and distribution might have warranted close peer reviews that would exclude publication of the majority of texts submitted. As print copies of scholarly journals are rapidly becoming academic fossils, some scholars have begun to argue against the traditional referee process entirely, a circumstance which would empower the academics excluded from the current power structure and offer a broader, more

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10. It is unclear whether texts solicited by the editors of *boundary 2* are reviewed, or may be denied publication.

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representative picture of scholarly inquiry. These circumstances, technologically and socially, call for a new system of dissemination that publishes all work, allowing individual readers the ability to see extra-systemic (and traditionally ‘rejected’) perspectives alongside the privileged editorial cloister’s opinions of what constitutes ‘knowledge’.

Open-source peer reviews

In the open-source peer review, all texts are listed in a database or online forum; a journal’s readership browses the texts and has authority to decide which merit top placement. Texts that receive positive comments advance on the list. The open-review process, as David Dobbs commented, ‘stands to maintain rigor, turn review processes into productive forums and make publication less a proprietary claim to knowledge than the spark of a fruitful exchange’ (‘Trial and Error’ 1). Open-source reviews turn the assessment process into a democratic forum that is at once egalitarian, progressive, and welcoming to new ideas. As Dobbs noted, ‘journals using these methods find them an orderly way to produce good papers’ (1).

The British Medical Journal has employed a similar system of non-anonymous reviews for over a decade. Editor Tony Delamothe has lauded the process, noting that ‘[d]ialogue is much better than monologue’ (quoted in Dobbs 1). While a few high-profile science journals – including Nature – have experimented with open reviews, the spread of the concept has been slow. However, as scholars who were raised in a digital age rise through the ranks and into editorial positions, this circumstance is likely to change. Joseph Pickrell, a doctoral student at University of Chicago, believes that ‘[c]utting journals out of scientific publishing to a large extent would be unconditionally a good thing’. He goes on to say that, ‘the only thing keeping this from happening is the absence of a “killer app”’ (quoted in Kolowich 1)11.

Shakespeare Quarterly used an open review in a 2010 issue. The editorial team posted four submissions and ‘crowd sourcing’ as Katherine Rowe – the guest editor – called it, could comment using their own names. The texts received over 350 comments and the authors of the submissions were involved in the interchange. The review process ultimately resulted in the articles’ inclusion in the journal. ‘It was on the

11. This topic has been examined in Pickrell, ‘The First Steps Toward a Modern System of Scientific Publication’ and ‘Why Publish Science in Peer-reviewed Journals?’.

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whole a successful experiment’, remarked Martin Mueller, a reviewer and professor at Northwestern University. Michael Witmore of University of Wisconsin, Madison, co-wrote an article that was used in the open review; he said they ‘got some terrific ideas’ including citations, from the comments (quoted in Howard 1).

Rowe also noted, however, that the elite-down power structure inherent to traditional review was still in place to a certain degree:

The people who were commenting online were very established, senior scholars. In fact, several junior scholars notified me offline that they had comments, but that they did not want to post them in case they contradicted the senior scholars […]. So while the process was supposed to democratize the review process, it did keep some of the old hierarchies in place. (quoted in Howard 1)

Nevertheless, Rowe believes the reviewers responded in a more ‘thoughtful and thorough way than in blind reviews because their names were attached to the comments’ (quoted in Howard 1). Indeed, the transparency of this new assessment is a leap forward for knowledge-communication and evaluation.

A fundamental question that this dialogue raises is: why should the academy use traditional peer review when the technology makes possible a system of evaluation that is considerably more comprehensive? Moreover, restricting the dissemination and assessment of knowledge to the opinion of a few non-democratically appointed scholars is restrictive and limits the cultivation of ideas. The quality of the work submitted to an open review would be, arguably, more rigorously vetted because the texts near the top of the potential ‘publication’ list would have many more viewers (readers) than in the current system. Thus, like Wikipedia – which was found by the journal Nature to have more accurate entries than Encyclopedia Britannica (Wilen-Daugenti 143) – open-sourced papers receive more thorough scrutiny than the traditional system. Each reader, in addition, would have the opportunity to report errors or inaccuracies in real time, allowing revisions to proceed through a collaborative framework. While traditional reviews have no quality control whatever, the assessment of the open review would be transparent, straightforward and democratic.

The voices against such egalitarian shifts in publishing are generally from elite scholars who would lose an element of the social power that accompanies their position in the traditional system: ‘Let us not forget’, noted David Shatz, journal editor and professor at Columbia, ‘that editors
and sponsoring universities would lose power and prestige even while their workload as judges would be eliminated’ (16). These remarks insinuate that editors work only as a function of the ‘power and prestige’ that they are afforded by controlling a publication; indeed, even if that were the case, in an open review an editor’s work would not change. He or she could continue expressing opinions in the same way and with the same regularity as the conventional system; the difference is that editors would be accountable for these opinions, and their judgments would be complemented and enriched by reflections from others. Kathleen Fitzpatrick responded to Shatz as follows:

The vehemence of such resistance reveals something about the nervousness of those who express it, and as in much psychotherapeutic discourse, it is only after some initial projection and displacement that the real source of that anxiety comes out: the loss of ‘power and prestige’. (Planned Obsolescence 26)

In How Professors Think Harvard professor Michèle Lamont proclaimed that ‘academia is not democratic’ (2), an observation that leads her to reflect on how peer review might be improved:

I also want to make the older, established scholars – the gatekeepers – think hard and think again about the limits of what they are doing, particularly when they define ‘what is exciting’ as ‘what most looks like me or my work.’ Providing a wider perspective may broaden the disciplinary tunnel vision’. (12)

Lamont’s references to age and gatekeeping speak to a desire within academic elites to protect their ‘power and prestige’ against new ideas that do not resemble their own work. The concept of ‘eliteness’ itself derives from comparison models that, whatever be the metric, cause a group to believe their own judgments are superior to the judgments of others. These mores do not offer basic respect for the integrity of academic freedom, equality or impartiality. ‘What is thus needed’, Kathleen Fitzpatrick has argued, ‘is not gatekeeping, but filtering, a community-based process in which groups of scholars determine for themselves the most important texts in their subfield’ (‘Peer-to-Peer Review’ 128).

Open-source reviews value democratic and egalitarian mores above traditional prescriptions of academic authority. In a larger sense, the axis of this problem is: what mechanisms should control the dissemination of knowledge? Who determines the composition of panels? On what basis does the authority of panel referees rest? In the same way that previously underrepresented groups have gained a voice in broader social and
cultural spheres since the 1960s, precisely due to their inclusion in spheres from which they had previously been excluded, open-source reviews would offer a similar redistribution of social power across all demographic groups. Fitzpatrick’s remarks on this topic underscore the need for change:

But finally, if the loss of power and prestige are our primary concerns in clinging to closed review, we would be best served by admitting this to ourselves up front. If we enjoy the privileges that obtain from upholding a closed system of discourse sufficiently that we’re unwilling to subject it to critical scrutiny, we may also need to accept the fact that the mainstream of public intellectual life will continue, in the main, to ignore our work. […] This can no doubt be rationalized as the inevitable, unenviable fate of genius in a world of mediocrity. (Planned Obsolescence 20)

In a world where information can be made available to all, instantly and for free, traditional editorship and refereeing, if they result in rejections, amount to censorship. It is an ethical progression for publication to move toward universal accessibility; expert editors and readers should continue to choose ideas and explain their decisions, as in traditional review, but the elimination of access to ideas that do not correspond to elite standards (by ‘rejection’) should cease to occur. Posting all ideas – both ‘rejected’ and ‘sanctioned’/‘published’ – and providing reasons for these rankings, would be at once an empowering and no-cost shift in publication norms. The open-source review would make it possible for all experts to offer their opinions equally. It offers a format that would make the cultivation of knowledge at once a more robust and collective activity and a process that is more representative of the academic community as a whole.

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