Book Review
Peer Review: Reform and Renewal in Scientific Publishing

Sarah Rose Fitzgerald

BOOK REVIEW

Peer Review: Reform and Renewal in Scientific Publishing

by Adam Etkin, Thomas Gaston, and Jason Roberts

Peer Review: Reform and Renewal in Scientific Publishing is an engaging, accessible overview of the processes of peer review in scholarly journal publication. The historical description of the evolution of the peer review process, in particular, humanizes scholars' efforts to develop a system to evaluate their publications. The text is well organized by headings and clearly outlines what to expect from each chapter. The authors' wealth of experience in publishing shines throughout the book: Etkin is an executive editor for Springer Publishing Company, Gaston is a managing editor at Wiley, and Roberts is the senior partner at Origin Editorial. The authors introduce the history of journal publication beginning in the seventeenth century, when peer review was not the norm, move through the mid-twentieth century, when it became standard, and continue into the present trajectory of the practice. *Peer Review* provides helpful descriptions of different varieties of peer review, such as single-blind, double-blind, and open review, and describes the challenges the practice faces.

This book will be of use to several audiences. Undergraduate students can gain an understanding of how peer review lends credibility to research. Graduate students can take away an introduction to what will happen to articles they submit for publication as well as how to write high-quality reviews. (More seasoned scholars may benefit from a reminder about how to write useful reviews as well.) Librarians can gain a thorough understanding of the varieties of peer review faced by patrons they serve. Graduate students reading the book should take note that peer review in their individual disciplines may not resemble the most common practices in peer review described by the authors. Therefore it is still important that they consult senior scholars in their field to understand the norms of peer review and reviewer selection that apply to them. As the authors note, even within a field, ideals for peer review may vary by journal, as do ideals for publication.

Peer Review could benefit from the input of someone with more expertise in the functioning of higher-education institutions and the realities of scholarly research beyond the publication stage. For example, the authors argue that peer review work should be counted toward tenure and promotion, but this work is in fact already rewarded as service to the field in tenure and promotion considerations. While service never carries the weight that research or teaching do, and there is little prospect that it ever will, it is still taken into account in faculty evaluations. In fact, the reward structure for service may lead to the perfunctory reviews the authors decry.

Peer Review misses its mark when it begins to suggest improvements for the peer review process. The authors lay out ideas for increasing the validity of scholarly articles accepted for publication, including automating the process of review or implementing a training program for reviewers. But the scholarly record has always incorporated flaws and controversy—not because peer review is defective, but because scholarly knowledge is evolving, and reasonable scholars disagree. Scientists with different perspectives vie to demonstrate greater credibility. Scholars build on faulty research to improve it and move scholarship closer to describing reality. And research sometimes gets published when it provides a step toward new knowledge, even if the data is imperfect. No automation or reviewer training will guarantee validity in publication. The authors also recognize that some lower-quality research is published to sustain less-prestigious journals and aid researchers in their pursuit of tenure and promotion. This practice is unlikely to be eliminated in the culture of "publish or perish" that exists in academia. The authors suggest that peer review would be improved if authors were required to provide more complete descriptions of their methodology before judgment was passed on their work. If indeed many articles are rejected due to incomplete methodology, this would be an improvement. Overall, *Peer Review* is a helpful overview of the peer-review process, although its authors—as publishers rather than academics—are not positioned to make predictions for the future of academia.

BIOGRAPHY

Sarah Fitzgerald is the assessment librarian for the University of Alabama. She holds a master's degree in library and information science from Wayne State University and a PhD in higher education from Michigan State University. Her research focuses on faculty work, scholarly communication, and information behavior.

CORRIGENDUM

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