Peer review: demand-side crisis or change of values?

Peer review is the most widely used system for assessing scientific papers. The premise is that the article's academic merit will be analyzed by members of the same intellectual community, impartially and most often anonymously. Reviewers perform their reviews for reasons other than economic gain, especially the following: a sense of belonging to a community; the exercise of academic power; privileged access to the debate; and the expectation of reciprocity. Such individual giving and altruistic cooperation with the scientific community's common interests are also part of a certain community ethos.

Based on its characteristics, peer review is similar to what Maussian anthropology calls ritual giving, a system of exchange based on the giving-receiving-reciprocating triad. In addition to circulating gifts, materialized as goods or services, ritual giving establishes ties (of friendship or rivalry), obligations, and ethical and moral debts. The gift offered to another establishes the opportunity for the latter to engage in giving as well, thus demarcating both a belonging to the same network of sociability and an affirmation of his or her persona.

Peer review is essential for producing quality science. Reviewing an article is a scientific activity. Researchers' reputations are built not only on the quality of their own articles, but also on the quality of their reviews of papers submitted by peers. In the scientific community's value system, a researcher's systematic refusal to perform reviews is seen as negative. However, locating reviewers for the numerous incoming articles has posed a growing problem for editors. There has also been a noticeable decrease in the quality of reviews.

The following are some potential solutions for dealing with this crisis: recruit recent Master's and PhD graduates to conduct reviews; minimize "missed opportunities" to register reviewers; conduct compulsory registration (for future review work) of authors when they submit new articles for publication; and encourage authors to recommend reviewers.

Meanwhile, when government research funding agencies such as CNPq and CAPES, respectively, process applications for research grants and graduate studies scholarships or conduct evaluations of graduate studies programs, it is crucial that their criteria include the quantity and quality of reviews conducted by researchers.

In addition to suggestions for dealing with the problem, we ask: what might explain this crisis in the peer review system? When the prevailing rules for analysis of academic merit oriented by parameters of intellectual productivism that value a certain activity (publishing) while ascribing less value to other activities, are such rules contributing to the adoption of a utilitarianist calculation of the use of time? If so, can we assume that we are witnessing a shift in the academic ethos, now prioritizing better individual results and wagering that the sum of these successes will lead to better development of the collectivity and science? Or are we facing the exhaustion of energies in this cycle of productivism? If we need two or three reviewers to review each article, what will be our capacity to meet such a demand? Is there something wrong with our way of practicing science and using our time? Or are we living in the mirage that more is better?

In the confrontation between the values, institutional rules, and beliefs that define the actions of our scientific community(ies), we ask: what kinds of exchanges and ties do we want?

Suely F. Deslandes
Instituto Nacional de Saúde da Mulher, da Criança e do Adolescente Fernandes Figueira, Fundação Oswaldo Cruz, Rio de Janeiro, Brasil.
deslandes.s@gmail.com

Antônio Augusto Moura da Silva
Centro de Ciências da Saúde, Universidade Federal do Maranhão, São Luís, Brasil.
aamouradasilva@gmail.com