

PERSPECTIVES

Invited article

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AUTHORS, REVIEWERS, AND EDITORS: THE TRIPOD OF THE REVIEWING PROCESS OF SCIENTIFIC ARTICLES

INTRODUCTION

When interacting with people who are not close to me, or who, although close to me, are not involved in the academic environment, I often hear the following question: “Don’t you work? You just teach, don’t you?” The years have taught me to respond carefully to this apparently confronting question (I say apparently because no one is obliged to know the details of another’s profession). My replies tend not to be pleasant experiences. Either making myself understood is difficult, or, the unpleasantness emerges from my interlocutor’s expression of annoyance in hearing that much of the time when I am not giving classes is spent with activities of little glamour and difficult mental abstraction.

As a rule, the conversation ends there. However, from time to time, it continues. To these interlocutors, I define my duties as typically giving undergraduate to doctoral classes, grading tests (help!), participating in thesis defense, workshops, and evaluation commissions, researching, writing articles for periodicals that few people read, and writing articles for the press that a few more people read. I also advise students, do administrative work (I can hear a voice in the background screaming: Boring...), provide services to the community, and attend to the specialized press when I am asked to. Last, but not the least, I mention that I also review scientific articles that can affect the fate of professional colleagues in Brazil and abroad. .

I believe that academics who read the above report have already gone through this situation. I also believe that a significant number of colleagues subject to the same tasks described above feel chills when they see requests for reviewing articles in their mailboxes. To decline or to accept reviewing an article: that is the question. We can refuse if the article does not belong to our area of knowledge or if we are too busy and cannot meet the deadline with the necessary quality. In such cases, in respect to authors and editors, it is better to communicate promptly and not accept the task. Whenever possible, however, we should accept it, especially if we frequently publish in the outlet that invited us, to help keeping the wheels in motion, making our knowledge available to the community that, whether we like it or not, we are part of.

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Good results from interactions of the triumvirate of authors, reviewers and editors depend on a non-trivial alignment of interests of the parties. Like a three-foot table, isolated problems at one end compromise the balance of the whole. However, the search for a harmonious arrangement requires an understanding of the expectations of each part of the tripod so that one can explore the existing complementarities and ensure that what is published is rigorous and relevant, generating value for the scientific community and society. In this sense, “salami research,” which is one that seeks to slice the findings into several by-products to maximize the number of publications (Diniz, 2018), is not in line with this set of values. It must be tackled by reviewers and editors (*gatekeepers*), at least to maintain the credibility of the community.

Next, I will discuss the three perspectives and try to reconcile their similarities, somewhat regarding “focus on what unites us, not on what separates us.” I hope this helps in viewing possible ways to overcome the challenges that are presented in the process of reviewing scientific articles in the area of administration in Brazil. At times, I will resort to the use of the first person plural, because I act as author, reviewer, and editor for scientific journals.

THE AUTHORS IN THE EDITORIAL PROCESS

We strive to shape an attractive academic contribution, capable of informing some aspect not yet explored in the literature, of shedding light on certain consolidated concepts with different theoretical or methodological perspectives or, even, potentially clarifying existing tensions between conflicting understandings. However, despite this, our goal is to see our articles published, preferably in vehicles that are read and quoted by our peers. Although we know that our profession involves the judgment of our work by peers who are specialized in the subject, we are often enraged to receive opinions that are not to our liking, either negative responses or requests for reviews addressing points that we understand to be little relevant.

Much of our disappointment comes from the fact that we attribute to ourselves a value greater than we possess, as explained by the theory of social comparison (Festinger, 1954). Part of this is also because of our inability, perhaps from immaturity, to understand the dynamics of the editorial process and to imagine ourselves as editors. However, editors cannot always choose ideal reviewers, and reviewers are people like us, with limited knowledge about certain subjects and who make

some mistakes as well. Among these failures is the incessant search for perfection in others without observing our particular limitations. In fact, we usually observe the speck in the eye of our interlocutors without noticing the beam in our own. If we often act this way, why should we expect different behavior from others? Likewise, authors who are most critical of the delay in receiving responses to their articles are often the ones who are unresponsive to the calls of editors, often simply ignoring them.

Instead of transferring blame, to deal with the frustrations inherent in the profession, another exercise is recommended: self-criticism. It may be prudent to ask ourselves if we are genuinely striving to identify a relevant research problem. Have we carried out a comprehensive sweep of the state of the art of the literature; if our theory, in the case of deductive research, offers testable hypotheses that represent an advance, not just a summary of obvious and expected phenomena? Are our data and methods sufficient and adequate to ensure some validity in our findings? Authors who are capable of this type of self-reflection in producing articles will have a better chance of surviving the uncertain process of peer review in the outlets of their choice. Unfair and unhelpful opinions are frequent and will not cease, but they are a result of the maturing process of the academy, which today is certainly much better than ten or 20 years ago.

In this way, the review process is part of our growth, because even though we do not have our supposed contribution accepted, the opportunity for learning provided by peer dialogue tends to be beneficial to all involved, as long as there is a true commitment to generate effectively relevant scientific outputs. Authors who are not aware that producing for its own sake is not enough, and who write merely to generate outputs instead of meaningful contributions (Cabral & Lazzarini, 2011), do not deserve the selfless effort of editors and reviewers interested in improving the levels of what is published.

REVIEWERS SEEN IN PERSPECTIVE

The peer review process, while widely used and accepted, is not without criticism. However, peer review, like democracy, seems to be the worst system except for all the others (Miller, 2006). Amid this imperfect process, reviewers have immense power over the development of the fields of knowledge and their own vitality (Bedeian, 2003). This is especially so when editors act as mere intermediaries and outsource editorial decisions (in theory their responsibility) to reviewers. Such a distortion, by the way, is relatively common in many of the journals of the administration field in Brazil.

Unlike authors, reviewers can have multiple motivations when reviewing scientific articles, besides a selfless contribution to the progress of science. Reviewers at the beginning of their careers or starting in a new area, on the one hand, can be extremely careful in their opinions, constructive for the authors and, at the same time, very useful in the editorial decision process. On the other hand, as well as satisfaction for a duty fulfilled, they leverage their reputational capital to editors. A new broom sweeps clean. The downside is that, due to lack of experience, excessive zeal or too much willingness to show service, this type of reviewer can be more rigorous than necessary and demand minor modifications of little relevance or even recommend rejection of articles that could evolve during successive interactions of the reviewing process. Editors who compare the reviewers' reports and the manuscripts submitted by the authors are essential to avoid side effects caused by the asymmetry between reviewers and authors.

Another type of reviewer can be quite unpleasant to authors and potentially harmful to the editorial process: the resentful reviewer, who, after being treated in a harsh and sometimes disloyal manner by other reviewers, seeks to revenge their past suffering in the work of the unfortunate author who had the privilege of having her/him as an evaluator. This situation is similar to the middle brother who, when taking a beating by his older brother, beats the younger one, who then beats the dog. There is an element of sadism, it is true, which cannot be ignored. Reviewers who take revenge on authors for not being cited or because the articles they evaluate put their previous work in perspective can also provide a nasty experience for authors. Similarly, authors suffer when reviewers can identify the authorship of the work and, to prevent the success of detractors or competitors (real or imaginary), place additional obstacles before them. In such cases, editors must arbitrate for the good of the editorial process and the sanity of all those involved. In any case, authors need to be able to deal with this process, avoiding useless animosity with reviewers and, above all, making the necessary efforts to include what is pertinent and improve the article.

Being aware of reviewers is essential to the process of a constructive review. Before all else, it is good to remember that reviewers are also authors and should understand how frustrating it is to receive an unconstructive opinion after years of work. More experienced reviewers are not subject to the same incentive structure as younger researchers, tend to be involved in other functions, and more frequently decline to review articles in periodicals (Northcraft, 2001). Authors, editors, and academy staff all suffer from this refusal and lose the benefit of accumulated knowledge.

EDITORS: GUARDIANS OF THE EDITORIAL PROCESS

While still a doctoral student, I had the opportunity to attend a roundtable with periodical editors, at the 2003 ENANPAD in Atibaia, Brazil. At the time, the editors of the few "A" outlets in the management area exposed the prospects and hardships of the profession. It was the first time I saw the recurrent (and infamous) association of the editorial process and running the gauntlet in the midst of reviewers with stone clubs, pieces of wood with nails, and other instruments of torture. Having an article approved would be a result of surviving the martyrdoms experienced during the editorial process. In the eyes of those who were doing a doctoral thesis on the prison system and had already read Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, the figure made some sense and was emblematic. I also remember the words of the then editor of the RAE, Thomaz Wood, and his observation about the role of the editor: "One of the most effective ways to accumulate enemies." Perhaps the words were not exactly those, but after working with the editor of O&S and acting as a special issue editor in the *Strategic Management Journal*, I share the diagnosis suggested by Thomaz, delivered on the occasion as a joke, of course.

In fact, where the number of submissions is much greater than can be accommodated in a publication, as a matter of pure arithmetic, editors of scientific periodicals, from the authors' point of view, make more negative decisions than positive. Considering that negative decisions tend to affect the self-esteem and career of their peers, the unpopularity of editors in academic circles is not surprising.

The decision-making process of periodical editors in the administration area in Brazil gains additional complexity, depending on the scope of the field and its epistemological, theoretical, and methodological diversity. No matter those good national journals have established supporting structures based on associated editors and selfless members of their editorial boards to assist in the process of desk-review and the selection of reviewers, the process is still far from controversial. Unlike foreign peers, who can usually count on a reduction in teaching loads to perform editorial activities, national newspaper editors, as a rule, take on such tasks without any compensation. In other words, editors who work hard in Brazil may even generate positive externalities but tend to internalize negatives inherent in the activity, whether in the form of new enemies, neglecting their research agenda, reducing the quality of their classes or, even, in reducing time dedicated to loved ones.

The difficulty in selecting good reviewers, because they are hard to identify or are unavailable, or who, receive feedback in their articles as authors but hypocritically refuse to act as reviewers, makes it not uncommon for articles submitted to journals (national and international) to not be evaluated by individuals best qualified to judge them. These facts contribute to consolidating the impression that the fate of an article is determined more by the result of the allocation of reviewers than by its intrinsic quality and its potential contribution to scientific progress (Bedeian, 2003).

Editing a reputed scientific journal is about managing scarce resources. To use a concept from the strategy area (Barney, 1991), good and available reviewers are valuable, rare, and difficult to substitute resources. Protecting such sources of sustainable competitive advantage for a scientific journal is the job of the editor. Therefore, editors must promote a rigorous *desk-review* process, avoiding sending to good and selfless reviewers articles with intrinsic weaknesses that will have little chance of surviving the editorial process or, even, articles with little fit to the reviewer's knowledge. In both cases, the time spent (or wasted, if you prefer) of the reviewer with such articles, in addition to being an inefficient allocation of resources, will potentially imply the unavailability of that reviewer for other articles. Considering that one reviewer makes one to two revisions per year, the number of articles submitted to high-end journals exceeds the publication capacity by up to ten times and that, as mentioned, good reviewers do not arise by spontaneous generation, it is essential to avoid unnecessary burdens on this scarce resource.

Editors must be attentive to the evolution of the field and the new generations of better-trained researchers *make not of that*. Good doctoral and recent doctoral students updated on the state of the art of the literature, with mastery of the best research methods and an eagerness to be involved and gain legitimacy in academic circles (in addition to being great choices to compose the team of reviewers of the articles), are essential for the oxygenation and advancement of the field. It is the duty of the more experienced to train novices in necessary functions, and to open the way for new generations so we can continuously improve the process of reviewing scientific articles; as Chico Buarque would say in the song Paratodos: "Euhoe, youth in sight."

In addition to protecting reviewers from bad or inappropriate work for their stature, editors should use their gatekeeper's power to protect authors from inappropriate (or cranky) reviewers. An unfair, badly elaborated, or impertinent review discourages authors and harms the reputation of the editor and his journal. The challenge for journal editors in the management area consists in promoting efforts to change existing cultural standards.

This way, editors are expected to obtain a greater number of informative and quick opinions that are capable of advising them in decision-making and guiding authors in the process of improving articles.

CONSOLIDATING THE VISIONS AND GOING AHEAD

This short and, to some extent, cathartic reflection does not exhaust all problems of reviewing scientific articles in the area of management or of pointing to ready-made formulas to solve these problems. The complexity of the theme and limits of space do not allow something definitive, of course. From what has been discussed, however, it is clear that the challenges inherent in the review process can be addressed on various fronts.

Beginning with the premise that without effort, there is no result, authors can observe the style of reference publications in their area, find relevant gaps that can be filled using solid theoretical constructions and rigorous investigation methods where the research is of an applied nature. Reviewers, who are the mainspring of the revision process, provide great services to the scientific community when they dedicate themselves to the task of scrutinizing the work of their peers with due intellectual honesty, and contemplating rigidity in the criteria with kindness and ability to guide authors in improving their works. To editors—who effectively read all material sent to their journal, who create formal and informal advisory networks for decision-making, and who protect their scarce resources—good reviewers, are of great value. They ensure that the evaluation process by peers in the area of management can evolve and generate benefits for the community. The constant exercise of putting oneself in the place of the others involved when working seems to be a good way forward.

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