

ON PEER REVIEW

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Man of Science, 1839, American 19th Century, via National Gallery of Art

We have entrusted our scholars to judge other scholars. The peer review process has been elected, with debated origin stories, as the vehicle to moderate critique, evaluation, and caution to researchers as they share their findings with the world. The “academic enterprise,” to borrow Neil Levy’s phrasing, operates on a foundation of good faith to produce valuable and generative research. Theoretically,

with peer review in hand, the academy can sustain active, constructive dialogue and fresh research outputs.

Levy discusses this ephemeral element of trust (and the consequences of its loss) in the publication process in his book *Philosophy, Bullshit and Peer Review* (2023): “Trust is essential for the functioning of peer review – and, more generally, for the growth of knowledge – and becoming less trusting threatens our capacity to acquire and transmit knowledge.” We trust authors’ intentions to contribute something meaningful, we trust a level of commitment to established research frameworks (or at least reported frameworks), and we trust the author’s awareness of scholarly discourse thus far with a range of citations. At the same time, the peer review process is rife with misbehavior and suspicion. In 2015, researcher John Bohannon, reporting his experiment in a famous *Scientist* article, wrote a bogus paper with fake findings, fabricated authorship, and submitted the work everywhere he could with successful acceptances in multiple journals. But, writes Levy, “suspicion is corrosive because almost all behavior, and all writing, provides evidence that can seem to justify it given the right interpretive frame, and given a distrustful frame every piece of evidence decreases trust further.” How easily we can be unmoored! Levy’s assessment engenders more questions: Where does this place our peer reviewers? How do we judge their commitments to the field, the journal, and to the audience with their recommendations?

While the peer review process can fail us, it continues to be the main mechanism for interrogation and sign of rigor for authors. So, journals and scholars have created guardrails to ensure that the good faith continues to shine. Publications have established a variety of peer review structures to protect the process from degrading entirely, such as single blind peer review, where the referee’s identity is removed; double anonymous, both the author and referee are unknown; triple-blind review, where authors are also unknown to the journal editors; open peer review, where everyone’s name is present; post-publication author-led invited open peer review, where comments are welcomed by the author themselves; and so much more (Rodgers 2017). Some peer review processes mix and match their preferences depending on the goals and values of the journal, which can include transparency, accountability, tradition, innovation, and so on. Contentious, fraught with academic and corporate malfeasance, yet integral to the infrastructure of knowledge creation and sharing, peer review shakes its hand with the editorial process to shape the landscape of scholarship and research as we know it. How do we know it’s still working?

My conversation below covers this question and more. I am joined by Jenise Overmier, who is currently a Research Librarian at AFSCME, a labor union that represents public service workers across the United States. She comes from more than ten years in higher education as a Social Sciences librarian at Marymount University and American University. Her background in academic librarianship also includes reference support, library technologies, and collections strategy.

[Interview with Transcription](#)



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://umd.pressbooks.pub/scholcomm/lib/?p=59#audio-59-1>

As listeners will note, Jenise and I are good friends and colleagues with many of the same questions about scholarly publishing and the academic world. I always return from conversations with her a lit-

tle more inspired, a little sharper, and appreciative of the library profession as a whole. Between the two of us, we could cover a wide array of issues and challenges in scholarly publishing from our own backgrounds, curiosities, and general frustrations with higher education. The value of our personal perspectives, along with the perspectives of contemporary scholars, writers, and researchers, is a first step into the slow work of reevaluating the place and purpose of the peer review process.

In an effort to not bite off more than we can chew, I do not believe that we have to start with the same structural overview that Jenise and I recognize as the heavy walls and borders of the academy. Perhaps we can start at certain checkpoints to dismantle and reconstruct the peer review process to, in Jenise's words, "ameliorate" the crises of knowledge production and dissemination. Integrating and elevating referee work into a service requirement for promotion cycles; giving referees more time and funding to replicate studies in more disciplines; managing hierarchical dynamics in scholarly publishing; providing more recognition to those involved in the creation of the article/issue; and more. Even within a short conversation about the issues, we can find a host of answers to resolve many different kinds of tensions, frustrations, and fears. Empowering ourselves and each other to slowly but surely chip away at the "pain points" and build up the "potentials."

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