


2010

Will Peer Review Still Function and How?

Sheri Spaine Long

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.library.uab.edu/fw-arts-sciences>

 Part of the [Other Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#), and the [Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Long, Sheri Spaine. (2010). "Will Peer Review Still Function and How?" *Journal of Scholarly Publishing*, 42(1), 67–70. <https://digitalcommons.library.uab.edu/fw-arts-sciences/2/>

This content has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of the UAB Digital Commons, and is provided as a free open access item. All inquiries regarding this item or the UAB Digital Commons should be directed to the [UAB Libraries Office of Scholarly Communication](#).

Will Peer Review Still Function and How?

Sheri Spaine Long

Editors of scholarly journals increasingly use web-based peer review and tracking systems to offer enhanced speed, communication, automation and a complete record of submissions and peer review history. Such digital tools are likely to increase frequency of revisions and ultimately lead to a higher quality published article. However, with the larger and ever more dispersed reviewer pool that is facilitated by web-based systems, there is less reliance on elite reviewers. Therefore, there is more pressure on editors to assign manuscripts for review appropriately due to more peer reviewers, academic globalization, and the inherent depersonalization of the digital editorial assistant.

Keywords: peer review, scholarly journals, editorial role, digital humanities, web-based editorial assistant

In the last three years, I have had the privilege of taking the journal that I currently edit—*Foreign Language Annals*, the official journal of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages—from a somewhat primitive paper and e-mail based peer review system to a web-based peer review and tracking system. My term at *FLA* ends this summer, and I have recently been named the incoming editor of *Hispania*, the official journal of the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese. As its new editor, I will soon be leading *Hispania* through a similar transition. In the light of these experiences, I would like to share my experiences and observations on the present and future of peer review in the digital age.

I believe ardently in peer review because it contributes to the quality of what we publish and to the development of scholars in our respective fields. According to a recent international survey by Ware and Monkman 2008, 76% of editors indicated their journals used online tracking systems for peer review.¹ Considering that this many editors are currently using web-based peer-review systems, peer review in the future will likely

function in a similar fashion as it does now, although there are some differences and intriguing possibilities to consider. First, however, let us examine the similarities.

Academics will still prefer publication in prestigious, "ranked", high-impact (or so-called "name brand") journals in the interest of advancing their own careers. Peer review will not disappear because it is increasingly necessary to demonstrate the quality of one's scholarship and research in the interest of receiving merit pay, promotion, and tenure. Given this escalating accountability to document academic achievement, evidence-based data is essential to earn one's keep in today's academic world and will, therefore, survive digital transitions. High-quality, peer-reviewed publications will still be relevant and necessary throughout the digital age.

Interest in academic excellence also provides a reason to believe that peer review will be maintained as a best practice in our field. Responsible academics will continue to seek out journals that offer peer review as a vehicle for acquiring feedback on their work in the interest of developing and improving it.

Before discussing the differences and other possibilities offered by web-based peer review, it's necessary to look at some background information on digital changes in peer review of the last decades. According to Tananbaum and Holmes, the journal *Ophthalmology* first piloted a web-based editorial assistant in 1984.ⁱⁱ This experiment evolved into today's web-based peer-review systems, which offer some significant advantages including speed, the improvement of scholarly communication at both the intellectual and practical levels, and the automation of the routine tasks of anonymous correspondence, which saves substantial time for editors, reviewers, and contributors. This time saved allows the editors and peer reviewers to devote some extra effort to the

mentoring of authors.ⁱⁱⁱ One additional advantage should be noted—in the digital age, one can view an entire peer-review history and not just experience it piecemeal, which helps editors and reviewers better formulate their feedback.

Now let us examine some of the differences and new possibilities offered by web-based peer-review systems.

There is no denying that the increased speed and ease of communication allow for additional drafts of essays, which result in a final product of higher quality. There is now more “back and forth” during the pre-publication process. The author can truly embrace writing as a process, and additional revisions may lead to a more polished final article. I would argue that the writer stands to learn more from this process (enhanced by today's digital tools) than from the scenario that has been standard until recently—submission, a finite revision or two, then a final "thumbs up or thumbs down" decision.

From the journal editor's viewpoint, the creation, management, and upkeep of the reviewer database in the digital age is more efficient than ever before. The ease of adding to this database obviously leads to a larger and more far-reaching reviewer pool than in the past. Theoretically, a broader cross-section of reviewers can be more easily employed in the review process, yet maintaining a sense of who these reviewers are and what they are capable of is a distinct challenge. This can result in a so-called "democratization" of the process, which means that peer reviewers are likely to be less elite than in the past and that our future reviewer pools are liable to have a broader array of academics at different stages in their scholarly development. This puts more pressure on the editor and/or associate editors to vet and assign reviewers appropriately because the reviewer pool proliferates more rapidly within digital systems. Add to this increased population the

fact that digitalization also enables increased internationalization, which means that editors are likely to have peer reviewers from all over the world with whom they have had little or no previous contact and whom they may barely know by reputation. All of this is exacerbated by the fact that web-based peer-review systems generally rely on reviewer profiles, which are themselves based on self-reported data. This can leave an editor wondering if the information in the reviewer database is accurate, exaggerated, or erroneous—especially once you factor in the varied cross-cultural perceptions of achievement, areas of expertise, and different definitions of academic rank. The editor's role becomes more challenging because of what is (and what is not) uploaded onto the web-based peer review and tracking system. In short, reading a reviewer profile can become a bit like reading a Wikipedia entry—you do it with great caution because you know that its accuracy is not guaranteed.

Finally, web tools are expanding the notion of peer review to encompass new models of interaction and feedback in addition to those that occur during the traditional anonymous review process to publication. What may be their biggest advantage is the expansion of post-publication peer review and commentary. Published articles in a digital environment can be framed in a way that continues to solicit comments from peers. This is an effective and immediate way to stimulate scholarly discourse and exchange, while not simply promoting the view that the journal's publication is an end point in itself. In a digital environment, post-publication commentary is timely, if not immediate, as opposed to the slow-to-print "Letters to the Editor" or "Rebuttals" to articles that are still published, but that often lag significantly behind the articles they address. The organization and accessibility of communities of scholarly discourse in the post-

publication phase become a continuation of peer review in itself. Discussion and feedback can be robust in the post-publication digital environment, and supplemental items, such as pedagogical strategies, case studies, lesson plans, additional data, and more, can be developed and posted to enrich the article's content and relevance. This post-publication review and the development of materials ancillary to publication can take a scholar-teacher from research through implementation and then to best practices. It can serve as a potentially attractive addition to the professorial arsenal. Such an array of resources is particularly enticing to journals that are published by societies. Professional organizations tend to have varied memberships with myriad needs—some members call for applications of research, others need to engage in theoretical discussions, and yet others could do with the mining and interpretation of data, and so on. The digital environment provides a multipurpose forum for this type of interaction and gives peer review renewed relevance and a new dimension.

To conclude, I would argue that digital tools will be an opportunity for all of us—the editors, reviewers, and contributors—involved in the evolving construct of the scholarly "journal." We will need to rise to the challenges of digitization and the metamorphosis of peer review, in all of their future iterations, but the benefits and opportunities they bring should certainly outweigh the initial transitional difficulties.

University of Alabama at Birmingham

Sheri Spaine Long (PhD, UCLA) is Associate Professor of Spanish in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at the University of Alabama at Birmingham where she teaches Spanish language, literature, and culture courses at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Her publications include six co-authored college textbooks as well as over 40 scholarly articles, notes and reviews on literature, culture, and foreign language education and policy. She served as the Editor-in-Chief of *Foreign Language Annals*, the official journal of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) from 2006-09. The American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese

(AATSP) has named her the incoming Editor of *Hispania— A Journal Devoted to the Teaching of Spanish and Portuguese* in 2010.

ⁱ M. Ware and M. Monkman, "Peer Review in Scholarly Journals—Perspective of the Scholarly Community: An International Study," Publishing Research Consortium, 2008. Web. 27 February 2009. <http://www.publishingresearch.net/PeerReview.htm>

ⁱⁱ G. Tananbaum and L. Holmes, 2008, "The Evolution of Web-Based Peer-Review Systems," *Learned Publishing* 21.4 (2008): 300-306, on 301. Print.

ⁱⁱⁱ G. Tananbaum and L. Holmes, 2008, "The Evolution of Web-Based Peer-Review Systems," *Learned Publishing* 21.4 (2008): 300-306, on 303. Print.