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Author Responsibilities in Improving the Quality of Peer Reviews: A Rejoinder to Iivari (2016)

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Abstract:

In this rejoinder to Iivari (2016), I discuss authors' responsibilities in the process of ensuring quality reviews. I argue that one overlooked element in quality peer reviewing is authors' unconstrained right to submit manuscripts in whatever form or quality they desire. As such, I suggest adding some constraints and offering more freedom to reviewers to maintain viability of the scholarly publication system. I offer three responses to Iivari's suggestions and add two further suggestions for change.

Keywords: Peer Review, Author Responsibilities, Scholarly Publishing, Academia.

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1 Introduction

livari (2016) draws well-deserved attention to the critical role of peer reviewing as a system of assuring academic quality, and he offers three proposals to improve it. In particular, he suggests systematic feedback, recognition, and identification as three options to improve peer reviewing.

On the outset, I agree with livari's (2016) suggestions. I too believe peer reviewing is a key element in the ecosystem of scholarly work: both positive and negative decisions have significant and wide-reaching ramifications for all involved. As such, in the spirit of continuous improvement, peer reviewing requires our constant and repetitive attention, especially so since it effectively has not changed much at all over decades.

I believe livari's (2016) suggestions may be required but are certainly not sufficient. In particular, I believe they focus on only some elements—reviewers and the journals for which they operate—of the wider ecosystem of scholarly communication, which features additional actors such as authors, administrators, publishers, and others (Crowston, 2015).

In my rejoinder, I examine one of these other actors: authors. In particular, I discuss their responsibilities in ensuring quality in peer reviewing. In formulating my response, I draw on similar experiences as those by livari (2016) as author, reviewer, editorial board member, and more, recently, as editor-in-chief, albeit with the caveat that my experiences are nowhere near as vast. As with many of us, I have seen good and bad reviews as a reviewer, author, and editor. I also put forward that I, too, probably have written both better and worse reviews. While I would like to think that my reviews are always spot on, constructive, and developmental, the law of statistics alone (and my reflections, too) suggest that I did not write every single review as well as I could have. I say this not to denounce myself but to clarify that, when we discuss review quality, we need to acknowledge that the process performance will vary: sometimes more, sometimes less. However, it is unequivocally not the result of individuals' poor understanding, poor knowledge, poor craftsmanship, or even poor commitment.

2 Author Responsibilities in Peer Reviewing

My view on author responsibilities has been ignited by my initial observations during my tenure as editor-in-chief of the *Communications of the Association for Information Systems*. I observed that I probably see a great deal more poor-quality manuscripts submitted than I see poor-quality reviews. I have sadly also dealt with more issues involving authors' violating research conduct than reviewers' violating "reviewing conduct".

Much of the debate on reviewing (e.g., Lee, 1995; Weber, 1999; Saunders, 2005; Straub, 2009; Hardaway & Scamell, 2012) and livari's (2016) views explicitly or implicitly assume that every manuscript is worth reviewing and that, subsequently, peer reviewing's quality invariably depends on the steps and decisions taken after manuscripts' submission.

I believe that this assumption is neither realistic nor tenable. To put it provocatively: not every manuscript should be sent out for review¹.

At present, the scholarly publishing system provides editors and reviewers with a great deal of responsibilities, constraints, and regulations. Editors are charged with authority, need to handle ample workloads, need to have vast expertise in topical, theoretical, and methodological aspects of research, and need ethical and professional integrity. Reviewers, too—confined in a system where such work is voluntary yet implicitly or explicitly demanded—are charged with a hefty workload. Every single submitted manuscript typically receives attention from three to five—sometimes more—scholars tasked with editorial or review roles. Of course, in the case of desk rejects, this figure is cut to just one role (i.e., the EIC), but these cases do not happen all that often altogether, and, in the more common scenario, an editor-in-chief, a senior, or associate editor (or both) plus two, three, or more reviewers are assigned to a manuscript. So the distribution of workload leans heavily to the peer reviewing and not the authoring side.

¹ I caution the reader that I wrote this rejoinder to highlight alternative perspectives on a well-known problem. I mean the views and recommendations to trigger discussion and, thus, have written them to encourage responses.

I believe that an imbalanced distribution of power accompanies this workload. Reviewers and editors face much scrutiny in real life and in academic debate (as a case in point, out of 33 references in livari (2016), at least 20 deal exclusively with the reviewer role). Editors, for instance, are constantly reminded to monitor both the timeliness and quality of the reviews they request and receive. If a review becomes late or is of poor quality, they are asked to replace, revise, override, complement, or otherwise augment such a situation. Usually, they are also asked to rate and score their reviewers based on their timeliness and quality. Moreover, at least once annually a debate ignites about some element of peer reviewing that requires improvement. Recently, the issue debated (on AISWorld) was review cycle times: discussions criticized reviewers, editors and publishers, but not authors. There is also talk, implicitly or explicitly, about “black lists” of individuals that underperform in editorial or reviewer roles.

But we must also consider authors’ responsibilities. In the system of scholarly publishing, the author variable has the most degree of freedom. To a large extent, scholarly authors need this freedom: they need to be able to independently choose research and publication, style and format, genre and outlet. I do not dispute this. However, authors have several freedoms in the scholarly publishing process that at least deserve some consideration and possible revision. These include:

Choice of outlet: authors are rightly free to choose which venue they submit their papers to. Certainly, it is an important right to have. Most authors submit firstly to top journals to gain the most recognition and impact for their work if published. In turn, this choice leads to imbalanced distribution numbers across journals of different prestige. It also leads to situations where a paper does not fit with a journal’s editorial mission, which in the present system is unfortunate because such errors are often found out only when the review process (at editorial and/or reviewer level) has already commenced. As such, authors’ submitting to incorrect journals can consume resources and effort in an already overloaded system. One might argue that misfit is a minor issue, but, in my experience, it happens more often than not and requires much deliberation and often discussion at the editorial or review level because a) identifying and b) arguing misfit is not an easy task to complete, especially for top, broad-level journals that purportedly welcome many types of contributions.

Choice of genre and narrative: authors are also free to convey their research in the genre and/or narrative they deem appropriate. Again, this is an important right to have; however, it also puts additional burden on peer reviewing. Free choice in reporting leads to situations in which reviewers, often the first audience for a paper, encounter a genre and/or narrative they are unfamiliar with, uncomfortable with, or even unequipped to handle. While content matters, medium, too, is important for one to gauge contribution, originality, rigor, and so forth. To use a stark example: I have often seen that papers with a high percentage of mathematical/logical arguments (in the form of equations, lemmas, and theorems) face difficulties in gaining reviewers’ appreciation. Of course, one could put the blame on the reviewers or editors for choosing the “wrong” reviewers, but, equally, I believe that authors have a responsibility of choosing a way to report their paper that a particular journal or audience expects and/or is familiar with.

Preference for editorial and review team: authors also have a right to suggest editors and reviewers equipped to review their papers. There are some constraints here, of course (such as choosing scholars without personal or professional connection to the authors), and, in principle, I am fond of this system. However, a similar right does not exist in such a strong format for reviewers: while they can often suggest preferences for topical or methodological content, it is by no means similar to suggesting preferences for those authors’ papers they would like to review.

Disclosure of previous submission history: journals such as the *Communications of the Association for Information Systems* often face a peculiar situation: often, their fields do not consider them as their top journals, which, in turn, often means that they receive submissions that other journals have already previously considered and rejected. Setting aside code of conduct guidelines for a moment, authors often do not convey their papers’ submission histories. Equally, reviewers are often assigned to a paper to which they have been assigned before by a different editor for a different journal. A colleague of mine calls this “the small world problem” of any research community. I know of several examples, such as the reviewer that received a similar manuscript for review in no less than six different venues in the space of several months.

At this stage, I state that, *prima facie*, these four examples are entitlements that are important and worthy to sustain. Yet, for the purpose of this rejoinder, I discuss them with the view of sketching an alternative scenario in which authors take on more responsibility to help reviewers’ workload.

3 What If?

What if reviewers reciprocated some of the degrees of freedom that authors? In this section, I sketch some scenarios that offer more choice to reviewers and less choice to authors.

3.1 One-shot Options

Similar to authors being able to only submit a manuscript to one outlet at a time, a way of easing the workload for reviewers would be to have them commit to only one outlet at a time. If I am a current reviewer for, say, the MIS Quarterly, I would not be able to take on commitments from other outlets at the same time. In effect, we would need more reviewers, but each reviewer would have fewer reviewing duties.

3.2 Reviewers can Choose which Papers to Review

This idea is not new and has been debated, for instance, in the proposal for a review marketplace (Gray et al., 2006). The basic idea is that, much like authors have preferences for outlets or reviewers, reviewers can voice preferences (e.g., through bidding) for which papers they would like to review. A stronger version of this principle would include reviewers choosing or bidding for author(s) instead of papers.

3.3 Authorship only after Review Commitment

This idea, too, is not necessarily new. Similar to some online communities that require members to actively contribute before they consume content, journals could implement rules in which authors are only allowed to submit manuscripts if and when they contribute in a reviewer role. Such a principle could also be further constrained by restricting the number of allowed submissions based on reviews' timeliness, quality, or volume (or other metrics).

3.4 Monitoring Author Commitments

At least in (if not across) journals, reviewers' and editors' workload is usually monitored to ensure an equal balance across the board. No such efforts are made at the community level (or journal level) to monitor authors' commitments; that is, the number of papers under review at outlets at any given time. Some scholars may be more prolific than others (e.g., Dennis, Valacich, Fuller, & Schneider, 2006; Lin & Gregor, 2009; Dean, Lowry, & Humpherys, 2011); however, another way of looking at this is that authors that submit many manuscripts also receive many revision requests, which can be extensive and lengthy (and often take authors considerable amounts of time), which, in effect, retains editors and reviewers' commitment to such papers for considerable lengths of time. We can see this situation in, for instance, many long-retired editors that still have a backlog of assigned papers they need to continue to handle.

3.5 Reciprocations of Author Quality

Reviewers can be monitored and evaluated (implicitly or explicitly) in regards to their reviews' timeliness and quality. Journals can reward good contributions (e.g., through awards or through promotions to editorial roles). Penalties, too, exist but are not widely disclosed. While "blacklists" are often debated but do not officially exist, most of the outlets I have worked for at least maintain some internal memory of reviewer quality to (most commonly) avoid poor reviewers. No such system is in place for authors; at best, reciprocations for good authors are in place through best paper awards or fame in scholarly ranking lists. Reciprocations for poor author efforts (i.e., poor manuscripts) are not in place: authors are free to submit as many manuscripts as they like, which, statistically speaking, guarantees eventual success in the long run.

4 Conclusion

In concluding my rejoinder, I summarize my position with five suggestions for change. The first three contain my responses to Iivari's (2016) suggestions. The second two relate to my suggestion of increasing author responsibilities in the peer reviewing process on the basis of my speculative what-if scenarios above:

1. **Implement mandatory feedback to reviewers.** This suggestion entails, at the minimum, making an editorial decision on a paper on which a reviewer contributed feedback. It should also include feedback by the (senior/associate) editor on the review itself. This could take the form of comments on timeliness, positive aspects that the editor welcomed in particular, and encouragements for further improvement.
2. **Implement the option to disclose identities.** Similar to the optionally disclosing (senior/associate) editor information on published papers, reviewers, too, should be given the option to disclose their identity to authors—ideally both for rejected and accepted papers. Ideally, implementation would see disclosure as the default option with reviewers being required to opt out rather than in.
3. **Extend reward schemes beyond awards.** Best reviewer awards and potential promotion to one of the few editorial positions is by far not sufficient for the reviewer role's tremendous workload and importance. We need to identify and implement additional reward mechanisms as a community. I strongly believe that such rewards should not be monetary but could include a variation in teaching or administrative roles at the institutional level.
4. **Implement not only author responsibility but accountability for submitted manuscripts.** Authors need to take on accountability for their manuscripts based on the fact that their action requires other scholars in the community to take on the work and responsibility of reviewing them. We need to make efforts to balance peer review's power and workload distribution, which could include reciprocation acts for poor manuscripts (much like reviewers are penalized), a maximum number of submissions at any given stage, or commitments to review the same number of manuscripts one submits.
5. **Commit authors to reviewing.** I believe it will be unviable to maintain a system in which authors are free to put burden on the peer review system but do not commit to carrying that workload. While the community encourages quid pro quo intentions, we would do well with evaluating and possibly balancing scholars' commitment to both authoring and reviewing.

In closing, I also call for a change to the debate itself. Much like many other debates that we have pursued in our field, such as the rigor versus relevance debate (e.g., Robey & Markus, 1998; Davenport & Markus, 1999) or the field's core debate (e.g., Lyytinen & King, 2004; Weber, 2006), I feel that we spend too much effort on viewpoints and commentaries and not enough on collecting and evaluating evidence. Of course, both the two mentioned debates have spurred empirical research (e.g., Sidorova, Evangelopoulos, Valacich, & Ramakrishnan, 2008; Rosemann & Recker, 2009), and I would likewise appreciate more empirical research on the scholarly publication system in IS research. Again, I do not mean to say that no such research exists (I have been engaged in some of that myself; see Rosemann, Recker, & Vessey, 2010), but, far and wide, I believe we should collect more facts about authoring, reviewing, and editing submissions to dispel myths from truths. In other words, I still believe we simply need more data on the issue at hand. There are some examples in other fields for how such work could be carried out using data from the manuscript management systems we already use (e.g., Bornmann & Daniel, 2010). Perhaps we can replace some of the efforts that go into research productivity evaluations on an individual or institutional level with efforts that evaluate and improve reviewing's or reviewers' productivity and quality.

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