

Editorial #28: Driving with the Re(ar)view Mirror

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[Peer review in scientific publishing is in crisis](#). It may have been for a [while](#). Typically discussed under the header of the peer review crisis are quality, speed, and availability of reviewers. And as COVID-19 sped up peer review processes in [some](#) areas of science, it worsened existing discrepancies in others: a study [found](#) that during the start of the pandemic, women submitted fewer manuscripts than men but took on a greater share of peer review responsibilities.

In his [interview](#) as part of our Person Behind the Academic [series](#), however, [Jean d'Aspremont](#) offered a more fundamental critique of the existing system of anonymous peer review, calling out its lack of accountability and characterizing it as an “act of symbolic violence”. He goes on to state that, “[e]ditors, shielded by the peer-reviewers, can wield their swords at whim, make heads roll, hamper careers without being ever accountable for a decision which they ultimately are the only ones to take”, and, regarding reviewers themselves: “they speak the language of the right and the wrong, they award marks and judgements, they repudiate arguments, they discontinue emerging or nascent ideas, they even sometimes participate in terminating careers and throwing authors in depression. [...] It is said that anonymity is aimed at protecting the peer-reviewers and upholding the quality and robustness of the review. In this regard, I am struggling to see how the transparency of the peer-review process necessarily runs against the quality and robustness of evaluations. I believe that the decency of quality-control processes and the protection of the reviewers are better guaranteed by disciplinary ethics rather than procedural anonymity.”

Many of d'Aspremont's points were well received on Twitter, and it is a critique that we at Völkerrechtsblog cannot ignore. After all, what *are* the motivations behind our unusual – for a blog – commitment to anonymous peer review that we have been upholding for almost ten years at this point – often at the cost of speed and at moments to the frustration of editors and authors alike? Do we maybe just want to imitate the big kids, aka the international journals? Do we want to, as is part of d'Aspremont's critique, reduce our own responsibility for the decisions we nevertheless make when accepting or declining articles?

When talking about transparency, it is probably fair to note that we had already scheduled for this month's Editorial to be about our peer review process prior to us publishing and me reading d'Aspremont's valuable points. However, it was originally meant solely as a post expressing our appreciation for our peer reviewers (our [Scientific Advisory Board](#)) whose contribution to the blog, we find, goes unnoticed too often. In fact, the good people at the International Journal of Constitutional Law (ICON) beat us to that one with a [tweet](#) – ironically just shortly before us publishing the d'Aspremont interview – in which they thanked ICON reviewers by name for their

“impressive academic citizenship”. Making the contribution of peer reviewers more visible and even awarding them for their work as the too-often unsung heroes and heroines of academic publishing has actually become a thing in recent years (see, e.g., [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)). How does this trend go together with the points raised by d’Aspremont?

Since Völkerrechtsblog arose out of and is still, despite some of our best efforts, somewhat deeply nestled into the publishing landscape of German legal academia, it is perhaps worth taking this into account as the context in which Völkerrechtsblog adopted a peer review system from its inception. Most German law-related journals (and book series) do not have a specific peer review system in place, and the internal processes for both review and editing are, at best, opaque. Although studies on the impacts on published legal thought in Germany are still lacking, at least anecdotal evidence suggests that this leaves the system open to, mildly speaking, [shocking lapses](#), especially where submissions by (nominally) more senior authors are concerned – and a cursory look at the authors published most often in these journals suggests that the lack of review surely doesn’t increase diversity. Völkerrechtsblog has, among other things, always been a project of trying to “do German international legal academia differently”, and the adoption of an anonymized peer review system was a part of this.

But, as I understand d’Aspremont, he is not asking for an abolishment of the peer review system in its entirety anyway – he is calling for a peer review system that will not lend itself to abuses of power, and this in large part a question of editorial accountability. This is a demand that we take very seriously. Journals and blogs carry the responsibility for what they publish. In an anonymized system, they are the ones who cannot be (double-) blind to the power wielded by reviewers. And, importantly, they need to be transparent about how their review process works.

While it is our experience that reviewer anonymity as such is rarely the problem in itself – and has important upsides –, it cannot absolve editors from the need to be transparent about reviewer diversity. Our [list](#) of Scientific Advisory Board members showcases the many wonderful, dedicated, and talented individuals we are so pleased to call our reviewers – and also the areas in which we are still lacking. These shortcomings are, as the saying goes, entirely our own. In fact, we are currently doing our best to help broaden our peer review “roster” both to spread the burden of peer review and to increase diversity. Given the struggles to find responsive peer reviewers at all, this is hard – but we are trying.

And we do wish to highlight all of those who are committed to “academic citizenship”, as the ICON tweet puts it. An open access blog is a shared resource whose quality relies on the voluntary contributions of those who believe in it. We are thankful and humbled that so many brilliant individuals regularly give the gift of their time and brains to review pieces for Völkerrechtsblog. And we want to continue working with our Board, editors, and authors to build a system of peer review that, rather than steeped in “symbolic violence”, is based on accountability, transparency, and the common strive to make unique and important voices in international law heard.

