

## REVIEWING IS WORK TOO: TOWARDS FAIR, HUMAN, AND TRANSPARENT PEER REVIEW

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Peer review is one of the pillars of medical science. No serious scientific journal could sustain its credibility without the silent work of reviewers who read, analyze, correct, and often substantially improve the manuscripts they receive. Yet this essential work remains almost always invisible, poorly recognized, and unpaid.

For decades, this unpaid contribution was sustained by a reasonable idea: peer review was part of an academic community based on reciprocity. We review because others review our work. We review to protect the quality of scientific literature. We review to contribute to a collective conversation that goes beyond individual interest.

### A reciprocity that has become asymmetric

This logic, however, becomes increasingly problematic when the unpaid work of reviewers sustains publishing models with significant economic revenues. The contemporary scientific publishing system is not homogeneous.

There are journals run by scientific societies, universities, non-profit organizations, or diamond open access models in which reviewing without payment may be understood as part of a legitimate academic reciprocity oriented toward the scientific common good. This model is particularly relevant in Latin America, where diamond open access—with no charges for authors or readers—has had an important historical development and represents an alternative to the commercial model based on subscriptions or article processing charges, commonly known as

APCs<sup>1</sup>. There are also non-commercial academic journals, supported by scientific societies, universities, or foundations, which, even when they require administrative fees for their operation, declare that they do not pursue commercial purposes and allocate those resources to editorial sustainability<sup>2</sup>. At the same time, however, there is a highly concentrated commercial publishing sector. Larivière and colleagues documented the consolidation of large academic publishers in the digital era and discussed its implications for the circulation of scientific knowledge<sup>3</sup>.

In this context, many journals charge libraries subscription fees, authors APCs, or both. These costs are borne by universities, hospitals, public research agencies, or researchers themselves. Meanwhile, those who produce knowledge, those who evaluate it, and those who often finance it through public institutions do not receive proportional compensation or sufficient academic recognition.

### The invisible value of donated work

The magnitude of this donated work is considerable. Aczel and colleagues estimated that, in 2020 alone, researchers worldwide devoted more than 100 million hours to peer review, equivalent to more than 15,000 years of work<sup>4</sup>. The authors calculated that the economic value of the time devoted by reviewers based in the United States exceeded US\$1.5 billion; in China, US\$600 million; and in the United Kingdom, nearly US\$400 million<sup>4</sup>. Although these figures are estimates, they help to make visible a frequently naturalized reality: peer review is not free; someone donates it.

The problem is not only economic. It is also ethical, methodological, and academic. Peer review requires expert knowledge, independence, available time, and intellectual responsibility. It is not an administrative task or a minor courtesy. Each accepted review involves hours of reading, analysis, verification, and writing that are taken away from other academic, clinical, or personal activities. It is a specialized form of scientific work.

### Reviewers selected by algorithms

Increasingly, invitations to review appear to arise from automated systems that identify previous publications in bibliographic databases and send mass invitations to potential reviewers. Having published an article related to a topic does not, by itself, guarantee specific competence to evaluate a manuscript. A researcher may have published on a disease, a technique, or a population and still not be the right person to judge a particular methodological design, statistical analysis, clinical intervention, or pathophysiological hypothesis.

This practice creates a paradox. On the one hand, it appeals to the researcher's ethical duty to contribute to science. On the other, the selection of reviewers may be based on superficial bibliographic matching, without sufficient knowledge of their actual trajectory, independence, availability, or specific expertise. Automatically inviting someone to review is not equivalent to building a responsible editorial process.

The ethical guidelines of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), an international organization devoted to promoting good practices in scientific publishing, state that reviewers should accept an invitation only if they have the necessary expertise, can complete the review within the required timeframe, and have no relevant conflicts of interest<sup>5</sup>. However, this requirement should not fall solely on reviewers. Publishers and editors also have a responsibility to select reviewers carefully, transparently, and in proportion to the complexity of the manuscript.

### Symbolic and ineffective recognition

The usual forms of recognition are often insufficient. In some cases, reviewers are offered temporary access to repositories or editorial con-

tent, automatic certificates, or future discounts. In practice, however, these benefits may be cumbersome, of little use, or irrelevant. They do not constitute real compensation for hours of expert work.

Symbolic recognition does not solve the central asymmetry either: the publishing system obtains value from work for which it does not pay. A review certificate may be useful for a curriculum vitae, but it hardly compensates for the time invested, the responsibility assumed, and the value added to the manuscript. This is even more evident when the review sustains journals that charge for publishing, reading, or both.

### Artificial intelligence and bilateral transparency

The expansion of artificial intelligence adds a new dimension. AI may be a useful tool to assist reviewers: to help organize arguments, detect inconsistencies, improve clarity, identify omissions, or compare methodological aspects. Denying this would be naive. But its use requires transparency and limits.

The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE), whose recommendations are widely used by biomedical journals, warns that reviewers must maintain the confidentiality of manuscripts, which may prevent them from uploading manuscripts to AI tools when confidentiality cannot be assured. It also states that reviewers must comply with each journal's policy or request permission before using AI to facilitate a review. More generally, the ICMJE states that editors, reviewers, or publishers should not upload submitted manuscripts to AI systems when confidentiality cannot be ensured, unless authors have given explicit permission<sup>6</sup>.

This requirement, however, should be bilateral. If journals ask authors to declare the use of AI in manuscript preparation, they should also require reviewers to declare whether they used AI as assistance during the evaluation. Likewise, authors should have guarantees that their work was evaluated by responsible human reviewers and not subjected to delegated, opaque, or automated review.

### A reasonable position for reviewers

We do not question peer review. On the contrary, we defend it. Precisely because we defend

it, we believe that it cannot continue to operate through a combination of unpaid work, automated invitations, symbolic recognition, and limited transparency. Science needs critical review, but it also needs justice, responsibility, and trust.

We therefore propose joining an already existing conversation and helping to broaden it among reviewers, researchers, scientific societies, academic editors, and institutions. Reviewing should remain an act of scientific responsibility, but it should no longer continue to be an invisible source of value for publishers that charge authors or readers.

As an initial position, we invite reviewers to consider a common stance: not to accept unpaid reviews for journals belonging to commercial publishers that charge APCs or subscriptions. Any exception to this rule should be based on concrete, accessible, and verifiable forms of reciprocity, rather than merely nominal recognition. These could include remuneration, effective reduction or waiver of APCs, transferable editorial credits, formal academic recognition, simple

and functional institutional access, or verifiable support for reviewers and authors from lower-resource contexts.

Likewise, every journal that requests peer review should clearly state how it selects its reviewers, what type of recognition it offers, the actual conditions under which such recognition can be used, whether it receives income from APCs or subscriptions, and what policy it applies regarding the use of AI by authors, editors, and reviewers.

This is not about weakening peer review, nor about turning every academic evaluation into an individual transaction. It is about recognizing that reviewers' time, expert knowledge, and ethical responsibility have value. Peer review can no longer be treated as an infinite, unpaid, and automatically available resource.

If publishing has a cost, if access has a cost, and if the editorial system generates revenue, then reviewing can no longer be treated as if it had no value. Reviewing is work too; and expert academic work must be recognized.

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