

Peer Review Ethics and Politics; or, how to review something you hate.

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After submitting to a leading journal, an author receives an anonymous review demanding that all references to Bruno Latour be removed and replaced with someone else (probably the reviewer). Another author submits to a critical communication studies journal, arguing for the need to take right-wing militias in the US seriously, and is rejected for being “dangerous and unethical,” according to the reviewer. A feminist scholar has her manuscript rejected by a reviewer who wrote an exceedingly personal and nasty review, though at least spells out the venom (the essay later won an award from a major professional association). An article is rejected for “fit” in a media industry studies conference, because “this social network site thing will never have any relevance to industry.” Another receives no comments except that it should be reformatted as if it were a specimen of experimental social science, which it was not.

Everyone has a good peer review horror story. The themes are pretty universal: vanity, political gatekeeping, cruelty, cluelessness. It is easy to review a well-done article in your comfort zone, but what should you do when you receive something that is outside of it?

1. Read the article on its own terms. Does it succeed or fail in making its case, by the standards it sets? Authors frequently say that the best reviews begin by explaining what the reviewer thinks the author is trying to accomplish. Once you have done this, then get into where the author’s argument works or doesn’t.
2. Be careful in determining whether the article’s standards are reasonable. It is completely fair to expect an article not to “preach to the converted” and to support its claims with evidence per the practice in its subfield. As reviewers, we should be somewhat challenging readers, even for articles with which we are inclined to agree. But it is not fair to rehash basic debates because you happen to be on the other side.
3. Remember there are many bibliographies. If you disagree with something an author argues, you are subject to the same standards of evidence. If there is literature the author needs to read, be specific in what they should be reading for. Before you insist an author add a pile of entries to a bibliography, ask yourself whether it’s because engaging with that work will really substantially change the

article for the better. If the answer is “no,” then it doesn’t need to be there. If they are inadvertently reinventing the wheel, then send them to the library.

4. Be clear and specific in your judgments. A “revise and resubmit” should come with clear instructions for what to do, and a clear standard of what it would take to do those things. A “reject” is better than an impossible or very difficult revise-and-resubmit. But even there, you have a duty to be clear about how the article could be improved.

5. Write as if you are signing your name to it. Elsewhere I have argued for eliminating anonymity in peer reviews, at least most of the time (“A Step Towards Fixing Peer Reviews: Sign Them”). But since ICA won’t be facilitating single-blind review any time soon, a good guideline is to write to the author as you would want to be written to, or at least with words you would not mind having associated with your name. You can always offer to waive your anonymity as well (I often do).

6. Keep gatekeeping to a minimum. By definition, groundbreaking work will challenge common sense. For association journals that have broad mandates, fairness across ideological and methodological lines is of the utmost importance. Communication Studies is a vast field, an amalgamation of intellectual traditions that encompasses an immense range of objects of study, research methods, theories, orientations toward theory, and political ideologies. Reviewers should not be “enforcers” for their particular corner of the world.

7. Know when to walk away. Journals depend on established experts in the field to do their part as reviewers. But sometimes an article is too far out of your expertise. If you have no background in the author’s approach and no expertise in the subject matter, you probably have no business reviewing the article. Similarly, if you are so invested in an approach or argument that you can’t tolerate any other positions on the matter, you can’t be a fair reader to the author.

As reviewers, we should be curious and sympathetic readers; challenging interlocutors; fair, honest and consistent in our judgments, and open to work that we ourselves would not do. But we are also human, and so we can’t always live up to those ideals. In those moments, we can help the field grow by getting out of the way.