Our Billion-Dollar Donation to the Publishing Industry

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Soc Int Urol J.2021;3(1):5–6
DOI: 10.48083/ROGE9523

Critical issues related to the current system of peer review have been raised in a recent paper by Aczel et al. on the cost of peer review[1]. The authors of this analysis estimated that 9.5 million manuscripts are submitted for peer review in one year, requiring 21.8 million reviews. If each reviewer requires 6 hours per review (a very generous estimate from the urologic perspective), that adds up to 130 million reviewer hours in one year, which is equivalent to 15 000 years of work. Applying estimated average salaries to this time requirement, the cost adds up to $1.5 billion for the US, $626 million for China, and $391 million for the UK in one year. While the accuracy of the different numbers can be debated, the conclusion is very clear: we as a scientific community invest an extraordinary amount of time and effort in a peer review process that lines the pockets of the large publishing houses.

The response to this article on social media demonstrated differing perspectives on this issue. The publishing industry was notably absent from the conversation. Most scientists see the putative cost of peer review as a sign of a flawed system, but others have been less critical. Some scientists make the point that this is "part of our job," regardless of whether or not it is written into our contracts. The cost does not necessarily fall on the reviewer but instead on the university or other large institution paying the reviewer's salary, which in turn may come from a public source. Many researchers, however, are undertaking peer reviews on their own time, and this is perhaps even more common with clinicians reviewing for publications in fields like urology. Some reviewers may not actually have the benefit of an institutional salary but still perform peer review. At the same time institutions will not necessarily be interested in seeking compensation for the peer review their faculty members are providing, since their priority is to facilitate dissemination of the results of scientific research.

The main driving force for the current peer review model is the notion that we all gain from the peer review services provided by others when we publish ourselves, so we feel an obligation to give back. Academics consider this a service to the scientific community, although the burden of peer review is not distributed equitably, which increases the burden on individual reviewers. I am often surprised by the unwillingness of actively publishing young investigators in our field to provide peer review. Some clearly feel more of an obligation to give back than others, while others perhaps more readily see peer review as an opportunity, and still others probably are just less likely to say no when asked to do something. The bottom line is that the publishing industry is profiting enormously from our doing what most of us consider to be a necessary service.

Peer review activities are also underappreciated in the academic setting. We often see in the curriculum vitae of researchers a simple indication of the journals for which they have reviewed, but without any quantification of the number of reviews over a defined period of time, and no metric on the quality of reviews. David Smith (@DVSneuro), Assistant Professor in Psychology at Temple University, suggested on Twitter that peer review should be captured with a metric similar to the h-index for publishing (Google Scholar).

Payment of reviewers for their peer review is not an optimal solution to the problem. This would eat into publishers' profits, unless the cost were simply defrayed by higher subscription fees. However, it would impair the ability of smaller journals to compete, and it would make diamond open access impossible. Diamond open access is defined by authors paying nothing to publish while retaining copyright for their work and readers being able to access the content without charge.

It is important to highlight the benefits peer review offers the reviewer. Peer review is an essential component of the research process, and I have always been an advocate of urologists conducting peer review. Some of the benefits are clear: it improves critical thinking, enhances writing skills, provides early exposure to the latest science, makes junior investigators more visible to editors, and allows reviewers to learn from each other.

An article like the one by Aczel et al. has the potential to stir discussion and trigger cries of dismay about the current system, but the important question is how we can rectify the issue[1]. Aczel et al. provide insight into innovative measures that could reduce the cost and increase the value of peer review. Open peer review, for example, at least makes the review available to the greater community, which adds value but does not diminish the financial impact of the current model.

The problem is not the peer review–the problem lies in the profit margins of the publishers. As a community we need to re-think the publishing models. Open access is important, but as long as authors are paying publication fees, the authors and the reviewers are still providing the product that is making the publishers wealthy. Is diamond open access the key? As editor-in-chief of a diamond open access journal, my bias is clear. But should we as a field not be making a concerted effort to separate ourselves from the publishing companies and move towards this publishing model?

Reference

1. Aczel B, Szaszi B, Holcombe AO. A billion-dollar donation: estimating the cost of researchers' time spent on peer review. *Res Integr Peer Rev.*2021 Nov 14;6(1):14. doi: 10.1186/s41073-021-00118-2