The Quality of Scientific Research and Peer Review: The Rise of Open-Access Academia

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Abstract: _This paper aims to critically analyze the impact of peer review on the credibility of academic publishing, particularly considering the increasing prevalence of open-access journals. Using a qualitative research approach, we_

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employed a mini-review methodology. We include empirical studies, conference abstracts, book chapters, opinion pieces, editorials, and short communications, spanning from January 2015 to November 2023. The mini-review raises concerns about some open-access journals that may lack the rigorous manuscript evaluation found in traditional scholarly outlets. This shortfall could lead to severe repercussions, such as the inappropriate promotion of faculty members and the publication of subpar research. The study calls for collaborative efforts among governments, academic institutions, and other stakeholders to allocate resources effectively to high-quality, peer-reviewed research. It suggests the establishment and enforcement of strict policy guidelines to protect the integrity of the peer-review process and ensure the appropriate use of public funds in research. The study's distinct contribution lies in its comprehensive approach, integrating insights from various sources to offer a multifaceted view of the peer-review system's influence on academic credibility and societal advancement.

Keywords: peer-review process, open-access journals, open-access professors, research quality

I. Introduction and motivation

Scientific research provides several benefits to higher-education institutions, industry, society and the economy. These benefits include facilitating learning and informed legislative decisions, strengthening social structures, and driving technological innovations and developments. In addition to teaching, faculty members are expected to conduct research that generates new knowledge and, when published, updates the literature that supports scholars' pedagogy (Rolle, 2006). Published research also increases academic institutions' international rankings. Research is usually considered credible and reliable only upon publication in refereed journals. Thus, the publication process is the core of scientific-research development, and it plays a decisive role in the creation and dissemination of new knowledge.

The publication process starts when an author submits a manuscript to a journal. Refereed journals are typically considered trustworthy academic

outlets. The definition of the term 'referred' remains contentious, and many different parties have suggested their own versions of it. However, most scholars agree that journals which follow established peer-review processes to evaluate the quality of manuscripts can be described as 'refereed' (Dondio et al., 2019; Yang and Meho, 2006).

Peer review is the cornerstone of contemporary academic research and its enduring contributions to society (Sovacool et al., 2022). This method of assessment has undergone substantial changes since the late 20th century, and it is currently used to evaluate the scientific and ethical content of manuscripts, grant proposals and academic promotions (Ali and Djalilian, 2023).

According to a study conducted by Wiley (2018), the renowned multinational publishing company, a significant majority of academics (84%) assert that the absence of peer review would result in a lack of regulation in scientific communication. Furthermore, an overwhelming 90% of researchers express the belief that peer review serves to enhance the quality of their articles. Hanafizadeh and Shaikh (2021) argued that peer review is a crucial component of the scientific-publication process and offers tangible advantages to both journal editors and authors. The peer-reviewing of manuscripts works as a form of quality screening for refereed journals. The scholar who reviews the article is called 'reviewer' (other terms are 'referee,' 'evaluating reader' and 'editorial collaborator'). Due to the absence of monetary remuneration for this role, scholars frequently reject peer-review requests, which results in a scarcity of peer-reviewers and an increase in the time required for publishing (Sabet et al., 2023).

Based on our experience publishing in refereed journals over the past decade, this rigorous process is time consuming. It can vary from 8 to 18 months from the date of submission to acceptance. Some journals take more than two years to complete the review process and reach a decision. During this time, the manuscript undergoes one or more reviews. This improves its quality, which is beneficial for academia, industry and society at large. Any

compromise over the quality of the peer-review process could have significant repercussions, such as undermining the credibility of the scientific community, hindering the advancement of knowledge, harming the quality and reliability of the information available to the public, and making inappropriate tenure decisions.

Most peer-reviewed articles have been published in the medical and natural sciences, while the disciplines of management and information science have often been overlooked in this context. However, management and information science include several academic journals that employ rigorous peer review. Thus, it is important for authors, including junior faculty members and doctoral students, to gain a clear understanding of the peer-review process. Some important aspects are the mechanisms and logic behind the review process and open-access publications, which are crucial to their academic and publishing careers.

To analyse existing research and comprehend the current state of peer review, we employed a mini-review approach (e.g., Sovacool et al., 2022). Our investigation also looked at the consequences of compromises within the peer-review system, which have led to the rise of open-access journals. These journals offer a fast route to publication, and they make scholarly promotions dubious. These compromises can potentially harm the quality and relevance of research, thereby negatively impacting not only academia but also various industries and society as a whole. The present study asks the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: What constitutes a journal's peer-review process, and what responsibilities does the reviewer have as part of it?

RQ2: Which peer-review systems are employed by reputable refereed journals?

RQ3: What constitutes a good reputation and scholarly impact for academic journals?

RQ4: How does academic ventriloquism promote the culture of open access?

RQ5: How do open-access professors highlight issues with academic appointments and scientific-publishing practices?

The scope of this mini-review does not include the numerous limitations and critiques associated with the peer-review process, including personal biases, power differentials, variations in quality and issues related to timeliness.

In the next section, we outline our methodology. Section 3 presents the mini-review's findings, and section 4 concludes the article and suggests the way forward.

2. Method

We used a mini-review approach. To search for the most relevant articles written in English from popular scholarly databases such as Web of Science, we used the keywords: peer-review process, scholarly review process, open-access journals, reviewers, referee reports, editorial collaborations, MDPI professors, open-access academics and open-access professors. The selected publication period was January 2015–November 2023 (inclusive).

We also considered empirical studies, conference abstracts and book chapters, as well as non-empirical opinion papers, editorials and short communications (the latter mostly written by journal editors and editorial-board members). Furthermore, we included studies based on their relevance to the scope and purpose of our study, regardless of context and discipline. The chosen articles were thoroughly analysed using the Excel sheet to identify patterns, insights and emerging themes concerning the peer-review process and the development of open-access journals.

3. Findings

The results of the literature review were organised into six major strands.

3.1 What constitutes a journal's peer-review process, and what responsibilities does the reviewer have as part of it?

In scholarly publications since the early 1600s, the peer-review process is widely considered one of the most important factors affecting academic quality. Peer review has been seen as the cornerstone of the scientific method and process consisting of the formulation of a hypothesis, the systematic collection of empirical data to test that hypothesis, the testing phase, and the verification and adaptation (if necessary) of the hypothesis (Kalavar et al., 2022; Tomkins et al., 2017). According to Sovacool et al. (2022), peer review is the foundation on which contemporary academic research and its enduring contributions to science and society rest. Peer review is the primary method used to evaluate the accuracy, excellence and novelty of scholarly articles before they are published and peer review is largely considered an important component of academic publishing and the development of scientific enquiry (Hanafizadeh and Shaikh (2021). Similarly, Ali and Djalilian (2023) explained that science operates on the basis of trust and that it is imperative to evaluate every academic endeavour in terms of its scientific merit, soundness, clarity and lack of professional and personal prejudices. This evaluation should address the relevant topic and how the work enhances existing knowledge.

Given the growing importance of scientific publications and their tangible benefits to various parts of the economy and society as well as universities, faculty promotions and academic recognition, there has been a tremendous increase in the number of manuscripts submitted to refereed journals. For example, according to Sovacool et al. (2022), between 2013 and 2014, Elsevier received over 1.3 million submissions annually to *Energy Research & Social Science*, one of their peer-reviewed journals. Of these, only 365,000 were acceptable. This means that the rejection rate for the journal and period in question was 72%.

When a manuscript is submitted for publication to a refereed journal, the editor or the editorial board conducts an initial assessment of the submission. If found suitable for the journal, the editor sends the manuscript to two or more reviewers who will evaluate the study's strengths and weaknesses, the relevance and originality of its findings, its design and scientific rigour, the

methodology (including the sampling and data collection techniques), the results' interpretation, the language quality, and various aspects of the manuscript's presentation and organisation. The reviewers, who volunteer their time, suggest revisions and the possible decision concerning publication. The peer-review process guards against any compromise in the integrity of scientific publishing by guaranteeing that only the most appropriate and sound articles are chosen.

3.2 Which peer-review systems are employed by reputable refereed journals?

Before we delve into current peer-review systems, it is important to understand that in the process in question, authors, journal editors, reviewers and readers play different roles in handling manuscripts.

Four major systems of peer review exist, and they are editorial desk rejection (the editor rejects an article without initiating the peer-review process), open peer review, single-blind peer review and double-blind peer review. There is an ongoing debate regarding the merits and demerits of these methods; none of them is perfect, and they all have advantages and disadvantages. However, except for double-blind review, the other systems are inherently biased (Corey et al., 2022).

Desk rejections are decided on by the editor or one of the editorial-board members, and they are very frequent. Top-tier journals receive an average of 2,000–3,000 submissions for a single volume, which has 6–7 issues, and each issue contains 15–17 articles. This means that the acceptance ratio for core journals is less than 5%. Furthermore, anecdotal evidence suggests that desk rejections have been increasing, possibly due to the proliferation of universities and research institutions that produce great numbers of scientific articles which are sent to academic journals.

In the open peer-review model, all the stakeholders, especially the author and the reviewers, can identify each other. After the manuscript has been published, readers can access the reviewers' comments and the author's

response. The comments made by the editors are included in the pre-publication history that accompanies the final article (Moylan et al., 2014).

In the single-blind model, the editor allows the reviewers to know the names and affiliations of the manuscript's authors. However, the latter cannot identify the former, which is why this method is called single-blind peer review. This model carries a risk of bias as the reviewers know the author's gender, nationality, language and affiliation. Bias compromises the integrity of the evaluation; as a result, authors experience unfair treatment.

In the double-blind model, neither the authors nor the reviewers can identify each other. Here, the goal is to minimise the biases that could arise from knowing the identities of the authors. Most subscription-based journals and a number of open-access ones adopt this method, which is generally considered to be more transparent. Kwee et al. (2023) conducted a survey of 244 corresponding authors to understand the journal peer-review process and found that the majority (42.3%, n = 99) preferred the double-blind peer-review system.

3.3 What constitutes a good reputation and scholarly impact for academic journals?

Submitting research to journals that lack good repute might undermine the trustworthiness of a scholar's work and restrict their career prospects (Suiter and Sarli, 2019). In 2020, the number of academic journals globally reached 46,736, a 1.07% increase compared to the previous year (Wordsrated, 2023). Given this vast publishing landscape, several journals have recently been criticised for being problematic, predatory, deceitful, unethical and illegitimate (Suiter and Sarli, 2019). In addition to a rigorous peer-review system, several factors establish the reputation of a journal, and scholars are increasingly interested in assessing journals' repute and intellectual influence (Walters et al., 2016). These factors are summarised in Table 1 and briefly discussed below.

Table 1: Journal Ranking Quality Criteria Elements

S. No.	Ranking Type	Ranking definition	Managed or Introduced by
1	Impact Factor (IF)	Measures the average number of citations to articles published in a specific journal.	Clarivate Analytics
2	CiteScore	Calculates the average citations received per document in a title.	Elsevier
3	SCImago Journal Rank (SJR)	Weighs citations based on the source they come from, with higher value given to citations from influential journals.	SCImago
4	Source Normalized Impact per Paper (SNIP)	Contextualizes citation impact by weighting citations based on the total number of citations in a subject field.	Elsevier
5	h5-index	Measures the h-index for articles published in the last 5 complete years.	Google Scholar
6	Eigenfactor Score	Rates journals based on the number of incoming citations, with more weight given to citations from influential journals.	Clarivate Analytics
7	Article Influence Score	Measures the average influence of a journal's articles over the first five years after publication.	Clarivate Analytics
8	5-Year Impact Factor	Similar to IF, but it calculates the average number of citations received by articles over the past five years.	Clarivate Analytics
9	ABDC Journal Quality List (ABDC JQL)	ABDC has journals ranking with four ranks: A*, A, B and C. The ranking is an analysis of the quality and esteem of the journal to business and economics disciplines. Criteria for the ranking comprise the influence or contribution made by the journal to the field, the quality of editors and in addition considerations of the perception of the journal from external.	Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC)
10	AJG	The Academic Journal Guide (AJG) provides an authoritative guide to the quality and standing of journals in the business and management field. The grading is from 1 (lowest) to 4* (highest) with the measure derived from peer review, editorial judgments, and statistical indicators.	Chartered Association of Business Schools
11	JUFO	The Publication Forum (JUFO) is a rating and classification system for scientific publications used in Finland. Journals, book publishers, and conference series are rated on a scale from 0 to 3, where 0 is the lowest and 3 the highest. The ratings are based on the publication's scientific	Federation of Finnish Learned Societies

		value, internationality, and publication practices.	
12	Norway	The Norway Journal ranking system, also known as the Norwegian Scientific Index, categorizes journals, series, and publishers into Levels 1 and 2. Level 1 is the entry-level for scientific publications, while Level 2 signifies the top 20% most prestigious publication channels within a field. The evaluation is based on scientific quality, international standards, and committee recommendations.	The Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) on behalf of the government
14	Pakistan (HEC Ranking)	HEC categorizes the journals into W, X, Y, and Z categories, where 'W' represents the highest ranking. The ranking decision for journals by HEC is collectively based on a set of criteria that includes the journal's impact factor, editorial quality, and adherence to international standards.	Higher Education Commission of Pakistan
15	India (UGC-CARE List)	The list of the Consortium for Academic and Research Ethics (CARE) is maintained by the University Grants Commission (UGC). UGC assesses the journals against criteria that include peer review, publication practices, impact factor among others using quality requirements.	University Grants Commission (UGC) of India

Journal Citation Reports is a long-standing, renowned resource that is part of Thomson Reuters' Web of Science database (Walters et al., 2016). The JCR provides comprehensive data on the impact of journal citations. It measures how often articles published in a journal are cited by other journals, which indicates the journal's importance and influence in a certain field. The fact that a journal is included in the JCR is noteworthy as it indicates its legitimacy. CiteScore, created and managed by Elsevier, calculates the average citations received per document/article in a journal. The SCImago Journal Rank (SJR) is another quality indicator that weighs citations based on their sources, with higher values given to citations from influential journals. The SJR is managed by SCImago.

In addition to these widely accepted measures of the quality of academic journals, scholars have tried to understand the factors considered by authors.

For example, Gaston et al. (2020) examined 10 years of submission data from over one thousand journals. They found that the prestige of the journal's editorial board and the reception of the journal on social media were important aspects of reputation. Moreover, a journal's reputation was mostly based on its ability to sustain the calibre of its research through firmly established editorial policies and high-impact publications. Rapid peer review and publication will produce results right away, but they come with higher dangers of funding plagiarism.

3.4 Compromising the quality of the peer-review system and the birth of open-access professors?

Given the length of time needed to publish an article in a refereed journal and universities' prevailing 'publish-or-perish' attitude, many authors seek out expedient ways to obtain results quickly. This trend has led to the rise of open-access journals that promise rapid acceptance decisions without stringent peer review. Nonetheless, it is important to clarify that the peer review cannot be compared with the rise of open access. However, review and access are two fundamentally different aspects of academic publishing. The former is about how articles are accepted for publication (i.e., after a review or not); the latter is about how we can obtain those published articles (i.e., by paying for them or not). Many prestigious refereed journals publish open-access articles (which have been peer-reviewed). In certain fields, some reputable journals have gone entirely open-access. This is an important distinction that you should take into account in your analysis.

The open-access journals largely follow a business model centred around profit. They charge hefty publication fees, which represents a deviation from traditional subscription-based refereed journals that typically do not charge for publication. By employing comparatively laxer peer-review procedures, many for-profit publishing companies, such as MDPI and Frontiers (with headquarters in Switzerland) and Hindawi (with headquarters in London, UK), have become popular while jeopardising the quality and trustworthiness of the science they publish. To ensure that almost every article is accepted,

these publishing houses run quick peer reviews, most of which are completed within the remarkably short span of 40 days or less. This has led to the emergence of open-access professors (also called MDPI professors) – that is, scholars who have risen to the rank of professor with relative ease. Thanks to this type of open-access publishing.

The deleterious consequences of promoting this paid-for model are great. One of them is the improper utilisation of taxpayer money in the shape of research grants from universities, higher-education commissions and other funding agencies. Government funds are increasingly going to projects that use questionable peer-review procedures. These procedures can lead to a decrease in the calibre of scientific work by encouraging scholars to publish before carrying out proper research. This is particularly troubling in developing countries where funds for scientific research are already scarce and would be better used for high-quality studies.

3.5 How does academic ventriloquism promote the culture of open access?

Ventriloquism is a theatrical presentation in which a ventriloquist, also known as the vent, creates the illusion that a dummy or puppet, referred to as the vent figure, is speaking (Yan et al., 2023). The term 'ventriloquism' originates from the Latin word *venter*, which means 'belly,' and *loqui*, which means 'to speak.' Therefore, the literal translation is 'to talk from one's belly.' According to Sabet et al. (2023), academic ventriloquism happens when established authors, mostly from developed/Western countries, who have good reputations, strong research networks and excellent English-language skills, propagate prejudices against individuals from low-income and middle-income countries. Moreover, the prevalence of Western authors in top-tier publications frequently eclipses the perspectives of authors from less affluent nations. When journals adopt the unblinded or open peer-review model, academic ventriloquism is worsened.

3.6 How do open-access professors highlight issues with academic appointments and scientific-publishing practices?

A university's decision to prioritise publication volume over exceptional quality when it comes to research articles can have a negative effect on the merit of academic appointments. This can lead to an artificial reduction in scientific value. Candidates who write a lot but never excel or demonstrate quantifiable research findings could deceive executives by presenting them with inaccurate productivity statistics, superfluous and extensive qualitative reports, and audits that emphasise fundamentals. In an attempt to replace real, practical implementation that requires adequate review at a professional level, institutions that prioritise volume may unintentionally promote low-quality essays and loose boundaries, and they may only review finished products that contradict themselves. In addition, the shortage of funds for peer-learning evaluation is made worse by the push for quantitative rather than qualitative measurements. This tendency encourages low-tier multilateral institutions to entice scholars with financial rewards that go beyond grant-based subscriptions and competition, effectively stealing open-access processor sponsorships. While there is evidence that academic publications have a positive influence on appointments, these regulations should not be overly onerous since they obscure the principles that scientists adhere to in order to ensure fair and protected academic sponsorship, growth and monitoring rather than allow revolving doors.

4. Conclusion and way forward

The functioning of a good review system takes time, sometimes as long as two years. The problem of substandard and unscientific publications in open-access journals that make quick peer-review decisions is a critical one that demands immediate attention from government agencies, funding bodies, regulators, academic institutions and the scientific community. The only effective approach is a collaborative effort to uphold the highest standards for scientific research and publication procedures globally.

The problems with current academic appointments and scientific-publishing practices are brought to light by the emergence of open-access professors, who rise quickly to the highest rank of academia. The promotion of

undeserving individuals to academic leadership positions can occur when there is an excessive dependence on publication quantity rather than quality. Therefore, it is crucial to establish stringent evaluation standards to guarantee that appointments are made based on merit and high-calibre publications rather than publication quotas. To ensure that scientific procedures are followed and empirical results are published in esteemed journals, it is also essential to oversee the projects that are supported by taxpayer money. The present analysis has emphasised the need for morally sound and impartial evaluation techniques that take into account academic merit. Without such techniques, the quality and validity of published research could be jeopardised, and a country's image could be harmed.

Legislators and academic regulatory organisations can take several measures to deter the distribution of public funds to specific publishing houses. We outline a number of these below.

1. *Create and execute strict policy guidelines.* Lawmakers and regulators can draft policies that specify the requirements that research projects must fulfil in order to qualify for public funding. Doing so would be in keeping with the aspiration of numerous policymakers to establish a precise connection between research and the generation of economic and societal benefits (Linton, 2016). By using these policy guidelines, legislators and regulators can avoid funding projects that are bound to be published through certain presses and run the risk of drawing negative attention.

2. *Establish credentials for prestigious journals.* National regulatory bodies could develop systems of credentials for journals that publish top-notch scientific research. By identifying trustworthy outlets to publish in, these credentials could assist scholars and institutions in avoiding presses that appear to undercut serious scientific scrutiny by charging excessive fees and not complying with standard scientific-assessment frameworks.

3. *Establish new local scientific journals.* This can be a good way to get researchers and funders back on track by giving them a wider range of channels to follow and offering scholars of all stripes access to large

platforms for publishing their work. Doing so will lessen their dependency on expensive and unreliable publishing houses.

4. *Provide recipients of funding with audit systems.* These systems can be integrated into grant-management procedures to allow recipients to be questioned about how well they have used funds. Accountability measures guarantee high-performing results.

5. *Plan educational and outreach activities.* Holding informational meetings gives new funding recipients a clear understanding of their responsibilities concerning the need to follow the policies set forth by community leaders regarding the use of funds. Through this process, offenders can be eradicated from institutions, and complete compliance is developed.

By imposing more accountability on scholars, institutions and publishers, these measures can improve transparency, efficiency and ethical standards. This will guarantee that public funds are allocated to deserving research projects and, ultimately, scholarly publications that are reputable and noteworthy. Tenure decisions will also become more transparent and merit based.

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