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Featured: Asking Authors to Nominate Reviewers

Asking Authors to Nominate Reviewers

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In the process of submitting manuscripts to journals it is still quite common for authors to be asked to nominate reviewers. We are unsure exactly how widespread this practice is and we pose the question: Should the practice of authors nominating reviewers continue?

WHY DO JOURNALS REQUEST AUTHORS TO NOMINATE REVIEWERS?

Researchers have significant demands on their time, with reviewing and editing often a voluntary task largely *pro bono* and contingent on goodwill. Finding

qualified reviewers with the relevant expertise in the topic area is a challenge for the peer review process.¹ Editors face a range of difficulties in finding suitable reviewers for manuscripts. Even in established journals it can take several attempts at requesting to have a manuscript reviewed, with numerous refusals and non-responses. In less established journals the number of attempts may be much greater. In our collective experience, the range is approximately between eight to forty requests to find a single reviewer; and more than one reviewer is required for each manuscript. Clearly, while there is no guarantee that author nominated reviewers will respond positively to requests to review, the nomination of reviewers by authors is a labour-saving device for editors. It obviates the need to search for reviewers and the necessity to maintain a database of reviewers, although some journals may have a database to which nominated reviewers will be added.

PROBLEMS WITH AUTHOR NOMINATED REVIEWERS

There is no reason, if good practice is followed, why author nominated reviewing cannot work well. While a range of models exist, there are no particular standards governing it, and it is noteworthy that the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE)³ guidelines on ethical guidance for peer reviewing does not include nominating reviewers under the models of peer review that it considers. Some journals ask authors to inform the reviewers that they nominate in advance or to inform them that they have been nominated; some journals request the opposite and some journals offer guidance on appropriate nominations, with reference to conflicts of interest. Some offer no guidance at all.

While the authors may be better placed than the editor to know the expertise of reviewers in their particular field, this may be an attempt to ensure publication from favourable reviewers. The process of nominating reviewers opens avenues for manipulation of peer review, including the use of “peer review rings.”¹, p. 4707 While the suggested reviewers may be appropriate, editors should check the proposed

reviewers' credentials, expertise and contribution to the field using online databases to determine the reviewers' appropriateness for the manuscript in question. Compromised peer review processes are counterproductive to publishing and challenging to monitor.¹ A peer review ring involving several academics proffering favourable reviews *quid pro quo* and publishing in different domains are difficult to identify. However, authors need to be given the benefit of the doubt, with most acting ethically to support an impartial and robust peer-review environment.

When doctoral candidates and early career researchers are asked to nominate reviewers without the ability to opt-out, they may be placed in a compromising position if they do not have a thorough knowledge of reviewers with expertise in the field. They may propose reviewers who have a conflict, or not have the expertise as their network is limited. New researchers may also not be aware of the issues when a colleague proposes them as a peer reviewer. Journals need to provide the option of not nominating to avoid this pressure.

POTENTIAL CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The peer-review process is dependent on three key principles:⁴

- The work submitted is original and the author's own.
- Editors and reviewers are suitably qualified in the field of knowledge and methodology.
- The peer-review applied to the manuscript follows a strict process to determine the quality, scientific worth and accuracy of the work.

The ethics of reviewer nomination intersects with the principles of conflict of interest in peer-review. While the conflict of interest may not influence decision making it is vital that it is declared.⁶ Examples of conflicts of interest in reviews

include having collaborated with the author on recent projects, working in the same institution as the author, a close personal or professional relationships or a commercial relationship associated with the manuscript content.⁹ The Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) explicitly identifies the requirement of declarations in the peer-review process with cases, guidelines and flowcharts to assist editors (<https://publicationethics.org/competinginterests>). Publishers such as Elsevier provide conflict of interest guidelines for reviewers and examples include:

- Being a current or recent co-author with an author(s).
- Being a current or recent colleague within the same institution.
- Being a postgraduate supervisor for an author(s).
- Having a personal relationship such as being a close friend or family member.
- Having a financial interest in the study reviewed.
- Attaining personal/professional benefits from the review.

(<https://www.journals.elsevier.com/journal-of-systems-and-software/policies/conflict-of-interest-guidelines-for-reviewers>)

PEER REVIEW FRAUD

Which system of author nominated peer review operates, one thing that cannot be obviated is the possibility of fraud. There are cases where authors have requested to nominate reviewers, creating false email accounts whereby the requests to review come to them.^{7,8} The act of creating false email accounts for suggested reviewers and providing false identity and affiliation information is a serious form of misconduct and potentially criminal.² Peer-review fraud may be widespread, with 110 papers retracted for this reason over a period of two years.⁵ Common to all cases was the ability of researchers to exploit the systems of reputable publishers to undertake their own reviews themselves.

There are several types of fraudulent peer-review processes, ranging from minor to serious transgressions, including:

- Nominating reviewers with a known conflict of interest.
- Contacting reviewers to influence their decisions.
- Misrepresenting a reviewer's credentials, associations or expertise.
- Using a false identity, pseudonym or impersonating an existing researcher.
- Operating as part of a peer-review ring.

Some warning signs from reviewer nomination/exclusion include: asking for the exclusion of a large number of reviewers to limit the ability of finding suitable reviewers, recommending reviewers who lack an online profile, providing non-institutional email addresses or no links to ORCID, and rapidly returned positive reviews.⁵

IMPROVING PROCESSES

Editors, reviewers, and authors have a responsibility to investigate possible breaches and to follow-up on transgressions identified. Failure to do so will result in the promulgation of peer review fraud which will weaken and corrupt the process. Although fraud may be difficult to identify, it is the responsibility of all engaged in the publishing process to act with integrity and adhere to ethics in publishing requirements. Breaches ultimately constitute academic misconduct and may lead to manuscript rejection or retraction of published manuscripts, with consequences in one's workplace likely to result.

In consideration of the above, the following needs broad discussion and consultation for all those engaged in peer review and the broader academic community:

- The requirement to nominate should be clearly stated by the journal on their website and instructions to authors.
- Have an opt-out choice during the submission process to avoid compromising the author who may have a limited knowledge of appropriate reviewers.
- Acknowledgement of the value and quality of peer review in workloads and academic promotion.
- Authors and journals should work towards using keywords in the selection of appropriate reviewers.
- Editors should investigate potential transgressions and follow-up on known breaches.

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