Describe your first experience with peer review

I was in the third year of my PhD and was getting worried that other PhD students were already reviewing papers and I wasn’t. Finally receiving an invitation was exciting and a little bit scary. I spent quite a lot of time on the review, but I was satisfied with what I learnt from it. I recently wrote a blog post about the whole experience here.

What is the biggest misconception about peer review?

That the peer reviewed outcome of a paper is the ground truth. Plenty of poor quality papers get through peer review, while excellent papers get rejected. There are many reasons for this, but having only a few reviewers is an important one. As a consequence, it is important not to give up after rejection, and not to blindly believe everything that is published. Ideally, on the publisher’s webpage for each paper, I would want to see comments, including what the citing papers are saying about the paper.

What advice would you give to early career researchers about being a peer reviewer?

I would recommend looking at examples of reviews in your field – reviews that you or your colleagues received, but also open reviews that can be found on Publons. And I would definitely recommend to start keeping track of the reviews that you do, such as keeping the review itself, the review receipt (especially if you don’t get an email – take a screenshot!), and whether the paper is published eventually or not.

Do you sign and publish your reviews where journals permit? why / why not

Unfortunately I haven’t done this. I believe it’s not very common for the venues where I publish, and most journals and conferences explicitly ask that you do not add your personal details to the review. Because of the stage of my career, I feel like I should be following the rules, even if I think reviews should be signed.

Since discovering Publons I did publish the content of a few reviews I wrote, for papers that have now been published. To be honest I’m a bit nervous about it, so I will wait a bit to see if I get any comments from the editors / authors involved before opening up more reviews.

Final thoughts

As a PhD student I noticed that researchers were putting a lot of effort into increasing their h-index, but that reviewing papers wasn’t a priority – understandable if your h-index is taken into account for decisions such as a job or a tenured position. When defending my thesis, I suggested an alternative in one of my propositions [In the Netherlands, you defend your thesis along with a set of 10 propositions, which are opposable and defendable statements about your field, research and life in general]. The proposition read, “Introducing an index for reviewers as a counterpart of the h-index for authors would lead to more, better and timelier reviews.” You can imagine my excitement when I discovered that such an initiative already existed!

I hope that institutions and funding agencies will reward researchers for putting effort into increasing their “reviewer index” as well – it is great that there are already examples of this happening, such as the case study of Dr. Matthias Lien on Publons.

Thanks Veronika for joining in on the conversation about Peer Review.