

The vital importance of being Open: reflections on peer reviewing in scholarly publishing

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Abstract: This position paper reflects upon the publication policies and practices of the *Scottish Geographical Journal (SGJ)*, as presented by the new editorial team in their introductory editorial “In the critical department’: refreshing the *Scottish Geographical Journal*’ (Philo et al., 2022). Specifically, the focus is on alternative, open peer review practices that the journal has considered as one opportunity to emphasise mutual respect between scholars and substantial research quality, *vis-à-vis* aggression and Journal Impact Factors. The paper draws from the author’s own experiences as science editor, from her activities in science policy, and from networks in non-commercial open access publishing often referred to as diamond or platinum OA.

Keywords: open peer review, alternative scholarly publishing, diamond open access, platinum open access

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Recent years have witnessed an urge for alternative academic publication opportunities and practices. The request for an increased number of peer reviewed publications – primarily by research institutions and funders – has led to a multiplying quantity of scholarly journals, edited collections that introduce thematic research areas (such as handbooks, major reference works, dictionaries), monograph series with a multidisciplinary thematic focus, and other publication formats. Most of these are owned by international commercial publishers who make ample profits from this business. Scholars, instead, carry out the substantial work with little or no compensation for their invaluable contributions.

Editing and peer reviewing form an important part of our work as academics, and many of the publication processes that we go through as editors and peer reviewers are but substantially rewarding, meaningful also in terms of academic networking (Batterbury, 2017; Springer et al., 2017; Kallio, 2020). As the value of this work is much more than any payment could cover, the major issue for scholars frustrated in the current situation is not money *per se*. Rather, the problem lies in insufficient resources. For many of us the multiplication of peer reviewed research items has led to an overburden of editorial work and reviewing, which we do at the side of trying to get our own research published. Among the most distressing aspects in this work is perhaps that, oftentimes, one has no time to carry out these tasks as carefully as one would like to. Also, when you say ‘no’ to a peer review invitation by a colleague whose work in scholarly editing you greatly respect, you feel as an apostate. No wonder, then, why some of us have started to consider if something should be changed in the whole publishing system.

Another reason for seeking alternatives to present publishing policies and practices has to do with the principles and aims of commercial publishers that do not always align with those of scholars. One contradictory issue is quality assessment. Mike Jones (2017) has aptly asked, with reference to numerical research indicators, ‘Can research quality be measured quantitatively?’ This concern has been noted also by the *Scottish Geographical Journal (SGJ)* in the recent ‘critical department’ editorial where the new editors convey that they will give as little attention to Journal Impact Factors as they can, within the limits allowed by the commercial publishing house that hosts the journal (Philo et al., 2022). Criticising the dominance of English language as part of the problem in the present evaluation systems, Derek Ruez (2017) proposes an alternative tactic where scholarly contributions would be weighed in a pluralistically international academy. Perhaps the ‘language of locality’ mentioned by the *SGJ* editors (Philo et al., 2022, p.15), borrowing from Lorimer (2019), could also include attention to the actual languages in which the research is conducted, and encourage authors from different localities to draw from research published on their local languages? This would at least broaden the spectrum of publications that receive attention in the form of citations and give international visibility to research conducted in different language areas.

Another significant issue where the perspectives between commercial publishers and scholars often differ concerns open access. All quarters in scientific publishing are nowadays ‘for openness’, as in the word of today, yet commercial publishers’ open access policies are led by profit-making while the scholarly appeal is motivated by making research accessible to other researchers, various end-users, and civil society (e.g., Finn et al., 2017; Reinsfelder & Pike, 2018; Puehringer et al., 2021). This means that, whereas for-profit publishers discuss the ownership of intellectual property rights, for most scholars the key is access to knowledge. These basic aims may lead to very different open science policies and practices, including ethical distinctions. Many initiatives for developing alternatives exist, such as the *Open Journal Network* formed by diamond/platinum OA journal

editors, the *Cooperate for Open* and *Mattermost* initiatives under the *Libraria* project, and the *Operas* project, to mention a few international multi-disciplinary activities.¹

The introductory editorial by the new editors of the SGJ joins in this debate by making openings on publication practices that emphasise mutual respect and research quality. Most specifically, they discuss the peer review process so central not only to quality assessment, but also to the atmosphere wherein this work is carried out. As one thing, the editors have considered the possibility of open peer reviewing, which offers alternatives to the dominating double-blind process (Kallio & Riding, 2018; Jana, 2019; Kaltenbrunner et al., 2022).

Originally, the peer review process was developed as a method that emphasises quality assessment in the publication process, to counterbalance the powerful role of editors in accepting certain papers for publication and rejecting others, sometimes based solely on their personal preferences. The practice has been traced back to the Royal Society of Edinburgh, to the 1730s, and from then on different formats of scholarly peer assessment have been used and developed (Spier, 2002). In some journals, the editorial board does a large part of peer reviewing, while other journals rely on scholarly expertise in the scientific community at large. In some publications, editors have diluted their own role to the minimum by acting merely as a messenger between the authors and the reviewers, which again tilts the balance of power. Some publications, like *SGJ*, deliberate on their existing processes to calibrate them.

The standard double-blind practice keeps, in principle, the author(s) and the reviewer(s) anonymous to each other, while the editors are aware of everyone involved and act as messengers and interpreters in between. Yet it is well known that, in practice, the intended 'blindness' is easy to leak. When the author works in a particular geographical context, develops specific theoretical ideas, and/or is part of a sub-field where most researchers know each other personally, the reviewer with pertinent expertise is likely to identify the author or at least their institution. This recognition, obviously, changes power relations in the process as anonymity protects only the reviewer. Also, the position of the editor is not as even as it may first seem. For example, if the editor knows some participants in the process personally, their decision-making is likely to be biased, especially in situations of disagreement. Experiences of unequal treatment can be sensed by both authors and reviewers, yet it is challenging for them to bring this matter out since the editors' acquaintanceships are concealed by the blinded process.

Another, perhaps even more broadly identified problem in the blinded peer review practice, is what the editors of *SGJ* identify as reviewers' 'aggression' towards authors. They are not alone with their observation. In the social media group *Reviewer 2 Must Be Stopped* (see Wilcox, 2019), for instance, many lively examples of disturbing peer reviewer behavior have been shared by scholars (see also Tulumello, 2019). Even when not openly hostile (which also takes place every now and then), peer review reports may include unjustified criticism, suggestions for impossible changes (e.g., of research methods, participants, or the theoretical approach), requests to cite the reviewer's own work excessively, automated language editing requests to non-native speakers of English, and other comments that most of us would never offer in an open encounter, as for instance in a conference session.

Sara Fregonese (2017, p.195) takes up some of these shortcomings in her essay that focuses specifically on 'linguistic positionality'. She gives a striking example from her own experience, as an author, in a peer review process where the reviewer had first criticised her 'written English as 'hard to follow'' and after that 'required a justification for having conducted fieldwork in four languages.' 'I had to justify both my shortcomings in English and my proficiency in four languages for research,'

Fregonese concludes. What she found particularly disturbing in this case was the strong feeling that the reviewer never realised the offence that they made.

Recent comments to my own co-authored submission, from a respected international geography journal, are similarly illuminating. While the first reviewer (R1) follows the principles highlighted by the *SGJ* editorial, the other reviewers (R2, R3) employ a rather different style:

R1: *The theoretical discussion [...] is well opened. However, I feel that some aspects of the paper could be further revised for purposes of building a stronger argument. [...] Overall, I feel that the paper presents a very promising discussion and argument that could be articulated a bit more clearly and pushed a bit further. The language of the paper is very good.* [Detailed justifications offered for each comment, along with suggestions on 'potentially useful references']

R2: *I am very surprised that the article does not mention NN's (2011) work. Several of the points made in the article has already been addressed by her. The authors' need to read her work and consider in what way their article contributes beyond her analysis.* [Suggests a PhD thesis written in language other than English or the authors' native language]

R2: *Overall, these simplified and frankly untrue descriptions of [Country] (lumped together with the rest of the [Region]) gives the impression that the article has not been properly researched but draws on superficial or old knowledge about the [national] context [...] puts a question mark about the validity of the overall analysis. These issues must be addressed for the article to be considered for publication.* [No detailed justifications for any of the arguments]

R3: *This is an interesting article which focuses on [...] The article could be restructured as a form of literature review [...] There are too many concepts throughout the article.* [Confusing suggestions on a theoretically oriented paper]

R3: *English editing is needed.* [No errors indicated]

Researchers with long-term experience in scholarly publishing probably agree that this is a rather usual outcome from a blinded peer review process. It is not particularly hostile, but the contrast between R1, on the one hand, and R2 and R3, on the other, is evident. The latter two are using their position to criticise the paper without any risk of being held accountable for those arguments. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*,² Oscar Wilde captures well this position, of the reviewer behind the blinding curtain: 'I could deny it if I liked. I could deny anything if I liked.' In another part of the play, he plays with this character by asking, 'I hope you have not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and being good all the time. That would be hypocrisy.' To me, Wilde's sarcasm has been helpful in writing response letters to unjustified comments, thus the paraphrasing in the title of this paper.

In the portrayed case, the revision went back to the same reviewers, which is more a rule than an exception these days, and thus we needed to respond to all reports in a respectful manner, regardless of their nature, and then hope that the editor would take an active role in balancing between the comments and the revision. After the second round of reviews, it appeared that the editor's ethical agency was indeed required. Along with three review reports, we received a very carefully drafted note from the editor that clearly departed from how one of the reviewers used their blinded position:

I must say I am actually quite shocked with the comments from reviewer 2 and find them to be overall unacceptable, aggressive and driven by personal animosity. I am hesitant to share them with you, as I do not think anonymous peer review should be a place of unprofessionalism and unkindness but ultimately feel they should be shared as I think a lot of this comes down to disciplinary differences

As a result, the editor did not ask us to engage with the long review report from R2, of nearly 2000 words, in any other way than to check that authorship in a second-hand reference was clearly expressed. So, here 'all's well that ends well'. While this is something we senior scholars have learned to deal with quite well, as authors and as editors, my question is: Have you introduced this as a standard procedure to your students and the young scholars whose academic careers you wish to encourage? Or would you consider revealing to your children that this is how we adults, with the highest level of education, communicate with each other in our international working environments? If not, why do we consider the double-blind peer review process superior to other forms of quality assessment, as a critical component of the self-correcting mechanism of science?

There are many ways of carrying out peer review processes, and the double-blind versions are not the only ones with downsides. In many institutions and publishing houses, a certain criteria of peer reviewing is considered a guarantee of quality *in itself*, which of course it is not. For example, the Federation of Learned Societies has created a 'label for peer-reviewed scholarly publications'³ with criteria that requests: (1) at least two peer reviewers; (2) reviewers to have a PhD or equivalent level of scholarly expertise; (3) sending the peer review reports to the author(s); and (4) following a specific set of instructions issued by Finnish science policy bodies. While the label allows a choice between blinded and open versions of peer review, the publications that commit to it should not: (1) accept a paper reviewed by only one peer (which was the practice with this text, for instance); (2) invite PhD students or professionals working outside the academy without a PhD as peer reviewers (who are often better available and more committed to peer reviewing than established scholars); (3) combine the comments of peer reviewers selectively before sending to author(s), according to their own assessment of what would be useful for the process (which is sometimes the only ethical way forward, when a review report is aggressive or pejorative for instance); or (4) involve guest editors not familiar with the Finnish science policy instructions (meaning that they need to be Finnish speakers). As this example shows, well-intended criteria can also be harmful to publication processes if quality assessment would be better accomplished by slightly different means. This is to say that, instead of narrowing down the format of peer reviewing, to follow a specific format of open peer review, I argue for *broadening* the dominating formats. Editors should have the freedom to employ different kinds of peer review practices, as they serve the purpose, that is, scientific quality assessment (cf. Jana 2019).

In their response to the faults embedded in traditional peer review formats, the editors of the *SGJ* have decided that 'authors and/or reviewers who are happy explicitly to relinquish their anonymity at any stage in the process should be at liberty to do so' (Philo et al., 2022, 8). If encouraged by the editors, I believe that this step towards an open review process may be very influential, based on my own experience as the Editor-in-Chief of the journal *Fennia*, where most peer review processes are nowadays fully or partly open. *Fennia* has gone one step further in its open review policy. The journal offers the authors the opportunity to choose between open and blinded processes, and peer reviewers are invited accordingly based on authorial preference. It is possible for authors to request anonymity when accepting the invitation or when submitting the review, yet *this* is their 'relinquish' – they need to express openly that they do *not* wish to be identified, and not *vice versa*. This has

happened only a couple of times during my editorship. In most cases, peer reviewers respect authorial preference and join in the process with their own name and face, if at all.

When we started to offer the open peer review opportunity in *Fennia*, we were of course concerned that this could lead to an increased number of declines by invited peer reviewers, but such a trend has not emerged. As in all journals, it is challenging to engage good reviewers as they are overloaded with requests, but the open process does not seem a negative factor. Instead, along with authors, many peer reviewers have expressed enjoyment of the process, and reflected upon their experience in a very positive light in their commentaries.⁴

Many thanks again for the invitation to comment on a very timely intervention - and I have thoroughly enjoyed the open peer reviewing process, too. Look forward to drafting a response in due course. [A comment during an open review discussion, in connection with a critical comment to the revised manuscript, by peer reviewer Colin Lorne]

I am also interested to publish my comments or commentary, but my work needs some deeper revision before it reads well. This is interesting discussion, and yet this gives fresh material to also teaching when published. [A comment during an open review discussion, before the first revision round, by peer reviewer Ossi Kotakorpi]

What I appreciate about this open, online forum is the attempt to experiment with academic rituals of intellectual engagement, and thus politics. [Jen Bagelman 2018, published commentary]

I would sincerely like to thank editors of Fennia, Kirsi Pauliina Kallio and James Riding, for the opportunity to reflect on this eye-opening paper by Stephen Taylor. [Shenika McFarlane-Morris 2020, published commentary]

It doesn't happen to me all that often but sometimes you can end up reviewing a paper for an academic journal that is relevant to more than just scholarly debates and concerns. As luck would have it, being part of the open review process for William Walton's (2018) paper in this issue of Fennia was such an occasion. [Andy Inch 2018, published commentary]

As these excerpts reveal, we also publish commentaries on published articles from peer reviewers, which gives credit to their work and makes visible the interesting discussions that, usually, are not shared beyond the review process (e.g. *Fennia*, 2021/1,⁵ including commentaries on four different articles). Moreover, some of the reviewers have submitted their own work to *Fennia* for an open process, soon after their reviewer experience, or proposed a special issue, which we consider positive signals. By now, therefore, it has appeared that we can benefit from the cumulative experience: our authors make excellent peer reviewers in the open process.

Another matter that has raised concern in open reviewing is the quality assessment aspect, which we have found an unnecessary worry. Suggestions between minor and major revisions, resubmissions, and rejections vary similarly to blinded processes; that is, papers from open processes are not more easily accepted for publication. When the peer review reports arrive, we begin a review discussion where all open review reports are shared and discussed, and requests may be clarified or adjusted. This may lead to one or many revision rounds, and often we end up having an 'ongoing dialogical revision' where the discussion and the revision are carried out in parallel until

everyone involved is happy with the process outcome. This is especially useful when the author and the reviewer have a clear disagreement or when there seems to be a misconception between them regarding a concept or a method, for instance. In these cases, the possibility to *discuss*, instead of explaining one's views to the editor who may not be a substantial expert regarding the study subject, is particularly beneficial. The editor, instead, can take the role of a facilitator and see that the issue gets solved adequately, without compromising on the quality assessment. The final decision is, of course, still made by the responsible editor.

So, what happens in these processes regarding mutual respect and research quality, the two principles that the editors of *SGJ* hold dear? Open peer review is not an all-encompassing solution for sure (see also Jana, 2019; Kaltenbrunner, 2022). Variability in the quality of the review reports remains; some are very thorough while others are rather superficial, and we also get reports that have too much detail to be considered in any revision. Some of the reviewers are very committed to the open discussion, but some are too busy to get back after the first report or do not wish to engage in an in-depth discussion. But what we do *not* get is aggression. The difference is striking to my experiences as editor and author in blinded processes, and the guest editors of a recent issue of *Fennia* came to a similar conclusion (Albrecht et al., 2022).

In the *Fennia* open process, peer reviewers make an effort to 'adopt a spirit of constructive criticism and rigorous generosity, even when it is felt essential to highlight limitations of a submission's content, argument and treatment of relevant literatures' (Philo et al., 2022, p.8). To ensure that their message is rightly received by the editor, reviewers may send a separate note that describes the weaknesses more thoroughly, which is helpful in facilitating the open review discussion and ensuring that the revision is thorough enough. Similarly, the author may sometimes ask the editor privately about issues that seem difficult to reconcile. But these are exceptions: usually, all communication takes place through the shared discussion platform, in a respectful manner, leading to a publishing decision and potentially to published commentaries.

One important aspect in the *Fennia* open peer review is that the discussion between the author(s) and the reviewers offers everyone the possibility to assess their own views in relation to those of others. This is particularly valuable if the review reports pull in different directions or are very rich. In such a situation, peer reviewers can reassess what is reasonable to ask from their own perspective. It offers the reviewers the opportunity to respect each other's views, as well as to ease out the situation of the editor in balancing between the different suggestions. Further, the author typically takes very seriously the task of *responding* to the reviews in this open conversation, before and/or after *including* the comments in the revision – two processes that usually are one and the same thing. Indeed, we offer authors the possibility to create a revision plan instead of a response letter, which shifts the order of the revision process: responses are given first and, when accepted by the reviewers, the revision is created. These examples show how the open process supports mutual respect multifariously: not only from reviewers to authors, but also from authors to reviewers, between reviewers, and between editors and everyone involved. In other words, this can be called 'sharing the responsibility' for the publication process where everyone aims at high quality and respectful encounters.

I can hence only encourage the editors of *SGJ* to try out the different opportunities embedded in more open peer reviewing. Along with the other proposals that they make in the agenda-setting editorial, this may lead to a new kind of publishing tradition, one that – who knows? – will some day dominate in the field of geography and beyond. From my experience, open reviewing needs to be coupled with a well-founded desk rejection policy: only articles that meet the basic requirements of the journal and thus have real potential to be published should be sent out to peer review.

Otherwise, asking commitment and openness from reviewers is not fair. This does not mean a return to the time before peer reviewing, where the editor could use arbitrary power beyond external assessment. It rather emphasises editors', peer reviewers' and authors' *different* roles in the process, where the editor stands as an interpreter, decision-maker and agenda-setter (Kallio, 2020).

I will end this commentary with a recent experiment in the field of open publishing, as 'food for thought' (pun intended). Similarly to many scholarly editors referenced in this text, including the editors of *SGJ* and *Fennia*, Pia and Zerilli (2022, no pagination) want to work in 'a more cooperative framework, governed by mutual trust between readers, reviewers, and other scholar-publishers.' They have been inspired by food sovereignty movements that develop new models for the 're-socialisation of the production cycle.' They ask, could we do something similar in academic publishing? A colleague with whom I am affiliated in the *Free Journal Network* – Simon J. Batterbury, a long-term advocate for non-commercial open publishing – suggested an apt label for such endeavor: 'craft journals'? In Scotland, this should sound like an inviting initiative.

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Notes

¹ For further information about the initiatives mentioned here, see: <http://freejournals.org/>; <https://libraria.cc/about/>; and <https://www.operas-eu.org/>.

² The full text of this play can be found online in various places: eg. <https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/earnest/full-text/>.

³ See <https://www.tsv.fi/en/services/label-for-peer-reviewed-scholarly-publications>.

⁴ Comments published by the permission of the peer reviewers.

⁵ See <https://fennia.journal.fi/issue/view/7317>.

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