

Is peer review evolving in the open access environment?

A survey of Croatian open access journals

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Introduction

Most of Croatian journals adopted the open access (OA) model and their content is freely accessible and often available for reuse without restrictions except that attribution be given to the author(s) and journal. There are **444 Croatian scholarly, professional, popular and trade OA journals available in the national repository HRCAK**, and 217 of them use peer review process as the primary quality assurance system.

Objectives and methods

The goal of our study was to investigate the peer review processes used by the Croatian OA journals, their characteristics and the editors' attitude towards open peer review.

An online survey was sent to the Hrcak journal editors with 39 questions grouped in: journal general information, a number of submitted/rejected/accepted manuscripts and timeliness of publishing, peer review process characteristics, instructions for peer reviewers and open peer review. Responses were obtained from 152 editors (141 complete and 11 partial). All journals that answered employ peer review process except one. The data were collected from February to July 2017.

Results

The majority of journals come from the fields of humanities and social sciences. Less represented are journals from the field of biomedicine, technical sciences, natural sciences, biotechnical sciences and interdisciplinary journals (Chart 1).

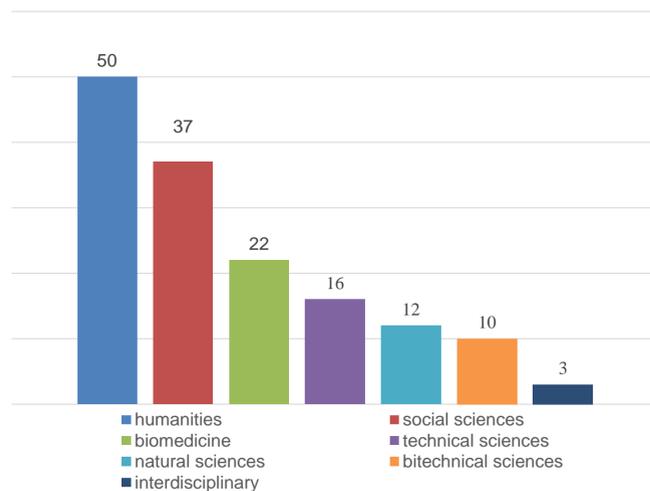


Chart 1. Distribution of journals by the scientific fields

Average **journal submission** is 54 manuscripts per year, but there are big differences among journals: maximum submission is 550 manuscripts, and minimum just five (Chart 2). In average journal publishes 23 papers per year after the reviewers' and editors' acceptance. In average it takes 16 days for sending the manuscript to the reviewer, 49 days for all the reviewers to send the journal a detailed report on the manuscript, 14 days to the editors' decision, and another 60 days for the paper to be published. That makes total average of 139 days from submission to publication (Chart 3).



Chart 2. Number of submissions per year in Croatian journals

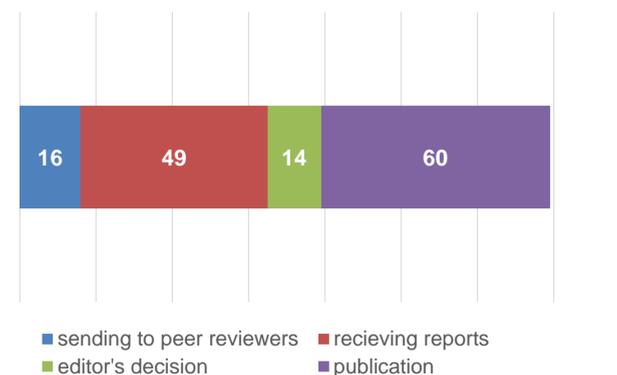


Chart 3. Average time from submission to publication in days

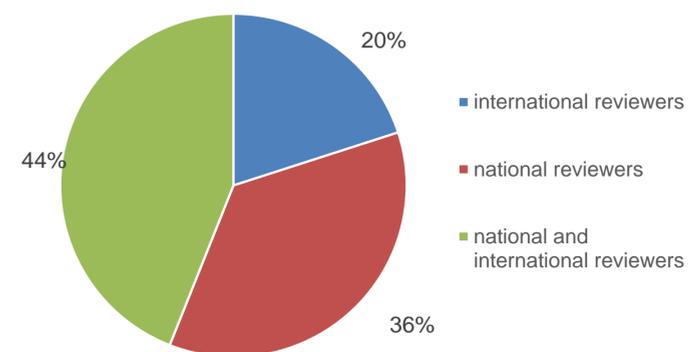


Chart 4. Origin of peer reviewers of manuscripts submitted to Croatian journals

External peer review process where reviewers are not members of the editorial board or employees of the journal's parent institution was used by 86 journals (60%). Other journals use external peer review process where reviewers are not members of the editorial board but could be employees of the journal's parent institution (n=40, 28%), and editorial peer review. Remaining 10% journals combine previous three types of the peer review. Only 20% journals use exclusively reviewers from abroad, 44% are combining international and national reviewers, and 36% journals use only reviewers from Croatia (Chart 4).

The majority of journals provide **two reviews** for each manuscript, and the process is **double blind**. Detailed **instructions for peer reviewers** are provided by less than half of the journals but **ethical issues** like plagiarism, conflict of interest, confidentiality etc., are neglected (Chart 5). Usually, a reviewer is not informed of the final decision upon the manuscript, and reviews are not shared among reviewers.

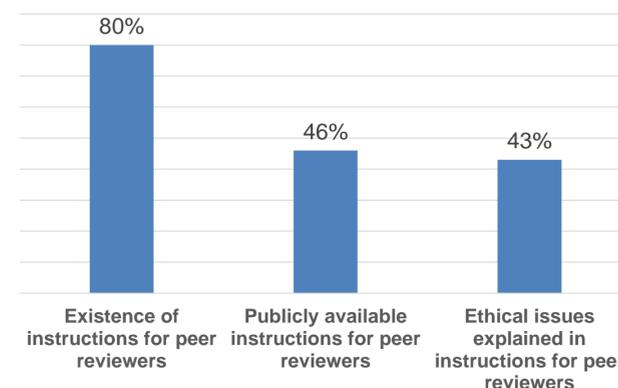


Chart 5. Availability and content of instruction for peer reviewers

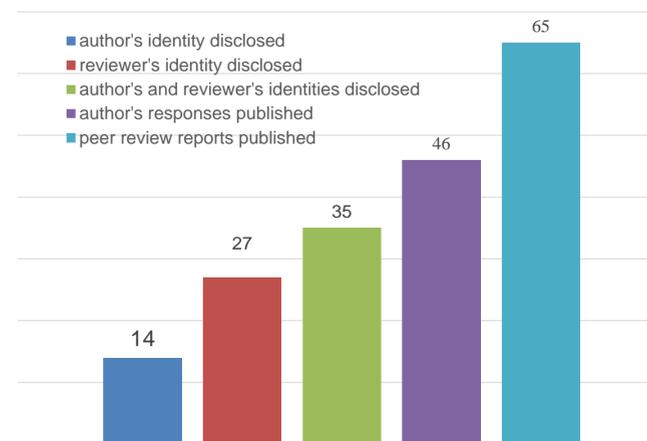


Chart 6. Editors' opinions about definition of open peer review

The opinion of the majority of the editors is that **reviewers must get credit** for their efforts (n=121, 85%). On the other hand, editors are not familiar with the concept of open peer review, which can be easily used for that purpose.

Some editors believe that open peer review is related to the **identity disclosure**: both authors' and reviewers', reviewers' and authors' identity. For many editors open peer review implies **publicly available reviews** and authors' responses (Chart 6). Open peer review is an unknown concept for 32 some editors (23%). Chart 7 shows some opinions on open peer review.

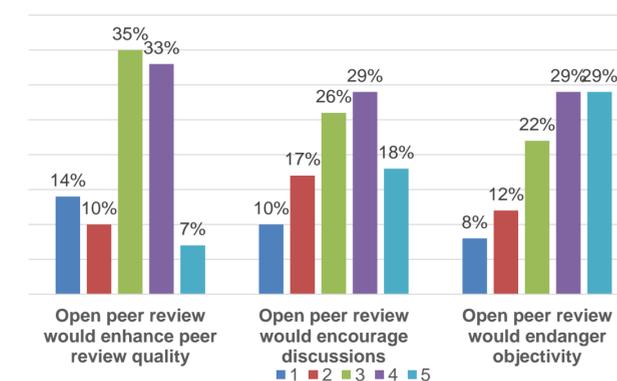


Chart 7. Editors' opinions on open peer review (1=don't agree, 5=strongly agree)

Conclusion

Croatian OA journals cover various scientific fields, but most of them are from social sciences and humanities. Average number of submitted manuscripts per year is 54, and average number of days from submission to publication (if the manuscripts are accepted) is 139 days. About 1/3 of the journals base the acceptance decision on the opinion of local peer reviewers.

There is a need to raise awareness of the importance of the **transparent guidelines for the reviewers**. In spite of all criticism, **traditional peer review** is predominant in Croatian open access journals. Our findings show that traditional peer review is still preferred review mechanism for the majority of journals in the study.

References:

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