

Support for Good Peer Review in OJS-based Journals: A Library Publisher's Perspective¹

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Abstract

How can a library publishing service with limited resources help editorial teams of peer-reviewed journals in their work? This paper focuses on the technical aspects of the peer review workflow that, if set up and adhered to properly, can contribute to improving the standard of the peer review process – and to some degree also the quality of peer review. The discussion is based on the work done at Septentrio Academic Publishing, the institutional service provider for open access publishing at UiT The Arctic University of Norway.

Introduction

Septentrio Academic Publishing is a service offered by the University Library of Tromsø to open access journals and series that are associated (through editors or scope) with UiT The Arctic University of Norway.² The service is part of the library's and the university's commitment to the open access mission: Septentrio offers its support for free and strives for its journals to have good quality and be visible in the open access infrastructure. One aim is that all peer-reviewed journals in Septentrio are indexed in the Directory of Open Access Journals, DOAJ. As of May 2020, Septentrio publishes ten peer-reviewed journals in a variety of disciplines (eight of them in the DOAJ) and eight series that are not formally peer-reviewed.

A handful of library employees are involved in running the publishing platform (Open Journal Systems from the Public Knowledge Project), providing technical support to the users, and giving advice to the

¹ This paper is a result of our presentation about support for peer review given at the midterm meeting of the IFLA Library Publishing Special Interest Group that took place at OsloMet in March 2020. IFLA stands for The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, <https://www.ifla.org/>.

² As this paper is published in a Ravnetrykk issue in honour of Stein Høydalsvik, it is appropriate to mention that Stein was one of the founders of the publishing service – and establishment plans for the service were mentioned in Høydalsvik (2002), <https://doi.org/10.7557/15.3844>.

<https://doi.org/10.7557/15.5499>

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editorial teams about best practice in various aspects of the publishing process, such as peer review. The amount of (wo)man-hours that we can invest in Septentrio work is limited – as all of us have other tasks. How can a library publishing service with limited resources help the editorial teams in their work? Our goal is to make the publishing process smoother, through appropriate workflows set up according to a journal's needs on the journal platform and through relevant information provided to editors, reviewers and authors at crucial points.

This paper focuses on the technical aspects of the peer review workflow that, if set up and adhered to properly, can contribute to improving the standard of the peer review process – and to some degree also the quality of peer review.

Support for peer review

The publishing software Open Journal Systems (OJS) offers a good workflow for the peer review stage of the publishing process, with a number of options that allow to model the peer review process in accordance with what a specific journal needs. However, not all our journals use OJS for peer review: some editors prefer the more familiar method of managing peer reviews via email, outside of OJS.

When we try to explain to editors why they should use OJS for peer review, we usually point to the benefits and importance of keeping manuscript history in one place.³ Improvement of the standards of the peer review process is another reason for why peer reviews should be handled inside OJS – instead of via email.

So, how can we as technical support staff help editorial teams with the peer review process? Peer review-related issues that can be affected by technical configurations, can be roughly divided into two groups: (adherence to) ethical standards and technicalities pertaining to blind review (single-blind or double-blind).

Authors, reviewers and editors should be aware of these standards and technicalities, it must be technically possible for them to comply with the requirements – and they probably also need to be reminded of them at various stages in the publishing process. Editors also have the added responsibility of making sure that authors and reviewers are following all of these standards and technicalities.

The Public Knowledge Project provides openly available user guides for the publishing workflow in OJS, where almost every step of the

³ During the publication process, the platform provides information on when review reports are due and sends automatic reminders to users when an action needs to be taken – so that it becomes easier for an editor to manage a journal. In addition, overview over both active and published or archived submissions is important when there are multiple editors or section editors involved, when editorial teams change, or when guest editors come in to publish a specific issue.

editorial process or the review process is described in detail. An important task of the support staff at Septentrio is to make editorial teams and other users aware of the OJS functionality, help to set up the review process in a way that excludes slip-ups, and make adherence to various guidelines and requirements easier by making them visible at various steps in the publishing process. The Septentrio team have also put together a number of guides on the publishing process, openly available to editors, reviewers and authors on the Septentrio website.

Ethical standards

There are guidelines for ethical standards in peer review from various associations. A good place to start for both the library support staff and journal editors are Ethical Guidelines for Peer Reviewers from the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE)⁴, as well as the Principles of Transparency and Best Practice in Scholarly Publishing⁵. Journal editors also need to be aware of discipline-specific guidelines relevant to their specific journal.

COPE advises reviewers to follow the journal's instructions for peer review – this emphasizes how important it is for a journal to have clear guidelines available for reviewers.

In November 2019, in connection with the 14th Munin Conference on Scholarly Publishing organized by the university library, COPE was invited to hold a workshop on the standards of peer review. Editors of Septentrio journals were personally invited to participate in the workshop, without admission fees. In 2020, Septentrio is planning to help its journals to assess whether their peer review processes are carried out in accordance with the standards of COPE.

The ethical standard issues that can be taken care of with the help of technical adjustments, include:

- ensuring against reviewer bias and competing interests
- accommodating for appropriate reviewer feedback and dealing with inappropriate reviews
- dealing with suspected ethics violations on the part of the authors

Review feedback should be unbiased – not influenced by the reviewer's possible competing interests, such as a close connection to the author or, on the contrary, being part of a competing research group.

⁴ COPE Council (2017). Ethical guidelines for peer reviewers. <https://doi.org/10.24318/cope.2019.1.9>

⁵ COPE, DOAJ, OASPA, WAME (2018). Principles of Transparency and Best Practice in Scholarly Publishing. Version 3. <https://doi.org/10.24318/cope.2019.1.12>

A journal should have a clear conflict of interest disclosure policy displayed in the reviewer guidelines on the journal's website. In addition, in the set-up of the review workflow in OJS, a journal should choose to make the conflict of interest disclosure policy visible to reviewers when they log onto the publishing platform. The workflow settings also allow a journal to choose to request that reviewers submit a competing interests statement.

Reviewers are supposed to give appropriate feedback. This, according to COPE, consists of a fair, honest, and unbiased assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the manuscript. The journal will of course be reminding reviewers about this in its guidelines, but there is also a tool in OJS that journals can use – namely review forms.

A review form consists of predefined questions or statements that reviewers can react to in a variety of ways: by filling in a text box, by checking off several checkboxes, by choosing one radio button or an item from a dropdown menu. It is possible to set up different review forms for different types of papers that a given journal accepts (articles, essays, squibs). By setting up review forms, a journal ensures that reviewers address the issues they need to address. Another benefit of review forms is that they help to standardize the review process and make it easier for editors to compare feedback on the same manuscript from different reviewers.

However thoroughly the review workflow may be set up, there is always a risk of inappropriate reviews. You may have heard about cases where e.g. the author's intellect is put into question, or there is gender bias. It may also happen that the reviewer clearly does not know the subject, so the review feedback is practically worthless. There are guidelines on how to deal with inappropriate reviews (from COPE, or from disciplinary associations), but editors should also know about technical options OJS provides them with in such situations.

If an inappropriate review has been submitted in OJS, an editor can *unconsider* it – the author will then not receive this review feedback. For future reference, the editor can then rate the reviewer and include notes with an explanation of the rating – the rating and notes will not be visible to the reviewer.⁶

While reviewing manuscripts, reviewers not only have to adhere to ethical guidelines themselves, but also to make sure that authors do so as well. What if a reviewer suspects a violation of ethics in the research process presented in the manuscript or detects a case of plagiarism?⁷ In OJS, a reviewer can inform the editors of a suspected

⁶ The option of reviewer rating is always there – not only in the case of inappropriate reviews. The rating system is designed to make it easier for editors to choose reviewers from the database on the publishing platform.

⁷ As a member of Crossref, Septentrio has access to the plagiarism-checking service Similarity Check, powered by iThenticate. All journals at Septentrio

violation without including the author(s) in the communication. There are different options for doing this. A reviewer can express her concerns in the “For editor only” textbox when submitting the review. A reviewer can also use the “Add discussion” option in the system (choosing the editor as the only other participant in the discussion) during the review process, before submitting the final review feedback. Using OJS for this type of communication also ensures that suspicions of ethics violations are saved for future reference, rather than being lost in an editor's email inbox.

Blind review technicalities

Of our ten peer-reviewed journals, two practice single-blind review, and eight – double-blind review. The fact that the identities of the reviewers and the authors cannot be disclosed to the other party means more things for authors, reviewers and editors to remember.

An author may inadvertently reveal her identity in the manuscript, replication data, the Conflict of Interest statement, and by making a copy of the manuscript available on a preprint server before submission. A reviewer may slip up and identify herself in the review report. Both author and reviewer may leave identifying traces in file properties and comments. OJS has built-in functionality for ensuring anonymity of reviewers and authors: when the blind or double-blind review option is chosen in the set-up of the review workflow, the system controls that authors and reviewers do not get access to identifying metadata. In addition, authors and reviewers are presented with the link to “Ensuring blind review” guidelines (pre-set by the OJS developers) at the relevant stages of the publishing process. Journals should also provide information about how to ensure anonymity in their Author Guidelines and Reviewer Guidelines, and set up the submission and review process in a way that precludes unwanted identification.

The author needs to make sure that there is no identifying information in the manuscript. This includes names and affiliations, acknowledgements, and the phrasing of self-citations. If a journal provides submitting authors with article templates, it may be preferable not to include the field for author name – so that there is one less thing for an editor to remember to take care of before sending a manuscript off to a reviewer. Authors – and also reviewers, if they are uploading any documents as part of their review reports – must remember to remove identifying information from file properties (the “last edited by” and “author” fields) and from any comments that have

can use the service (and the ones indexed in the DOAJ have to use it), and the library covers the Similarity Check fee for the journals. It is the editors' responsibility to run the submitted manuscripts through plagiarism check before reviewers are assigned.

been made using the “insert comment” functionality in their text-processing program.

If replication data are submitted to a data repository and made available to the journal’s reviewers, the author needs to inform the data repository curators that the dataset is meant to be made available to reviewers in a journal that practices double-blind peer review. The curators will then take the necessary precautions, e.g. by providing reviewers with a copy of the dataset that does not contain identifying information in its metadata or ReadMe-file.

When submitting to a journal using double-blind reviews, authors need to be careful not to include the Conflict of Interest (CoI) statement in the manuscript. It is advised that the full statement is sent as a Comment to the Editor during the submission in OJS, i.e. outside of the manuscript. The author should also provide a short version of the CoI (e.g. only stating *whether* there is a conflict of interest) in the Comment to the Editor (which can be forwarded to the reviewer by the editor) or included in the submitted manuscript (to be substituted by the full CoI before publication).⁸

Ensuring double-blind review may be challenging if the author's manuscript is openly available as a preprint. A journal's editorial team need to think in advance about their position on this issue: do they want to accept manuscripts for which preprints are available somewhere? The answer to this question should be “yes”: preprints contribute to the transparency and efficiency of scholarly communication, and there are fewer and fewer journals who have restrictive policies with regard to preprints. There is then not much for a journal to do except inform its authors and reviewers (in Author Guidelines and Reviewer Guidelines) that preprint availability is not a tragedy – even if the journal standardly operates with double-blind review. The author has to accept that double-blind procedure will not be guaranteed in this case – and reviewers should not reject an invitation to review a manuscript merely due to the availability of a preprint.

A reviewer may accidentally reveal her identity in the review report, e.g. by signing her name or by referring to something that can identify her. In OJS, the default, free form for a review report is separated into a field that is addressed to both editor and author, and another one that is addressed to the editor only. When forwarding a review report to an author, an editor should ensure that no identifying information is included in the forwarded part. A pre-defined review form – that we mentioned above in connection with appropriate review feedback – reduces the risk of identifying information being included in a review report. A review form does not contain the fields addressed to the

⁸ A reviewer’s CoI statement will not be visible to the author, as long as the review process is marked as blind or double-blind in OJS.

author and/or the editor – so there is less possibility that a reviewer may confuse the fields. Also, a review form – as it consists of a set of predefined questions and statements – may help to keep reviewers focused.

To sum up

There are standards and technicalities in the peer review process that authors, reviewers and editors need to be aware of, be able to comply with and be reminded of. The editor has a central role in monitoring adherence to ethical standards and anonymization technicalities.

A library publishing service can help the editors make the review process as smooth as possible, with a focus on the importance of adhering to ethical standards and ensuring the anonymity of the review process. The library should offer training in the use of OJS to the editors and may consider, as in our case, compiling a set of editorial resources. Producing editorial resources specific to your publishing service may seem unnecessary when there are good user guides made available by OJS and COPE. However, workflows differ – on publisher and journal level – so it may be useful for editors to have access to step-by-step guides that are compiled specifically for their needs.

When the technical part – including easily accessible guidelines – is set up properly, there are fewer possibilities for authors and reviewers to make mistakes and the review process is standardised for all submissions. This, in turn, improves the overall quality of the review process. A good quality of the peer review process from start to finish is something all journals should strive for, and, as shown here, a library publishing service can play an important role in achieving this.