Opening peer review in Algerian universities: Survey of The Faculty at The Institute of Library Science and Documentation – University of Algiers II- AbulKacem SaadAllah University - (Algeria)

Samir Hachani

University of Algiers II-AbulKacem Saad Allah

The 20th Munin Conference

18-20th November 2025

IUT –Arctic University of Tromso

Peer review: an ancient and rather unsuspected origin (s)

Was not used in the way we know it now but took different forms that are related to what is known now.

- First *FORMS* were related to some sort of CONTROL of different professions. Among the most known and close to the actual peer review , were :

- In the 5th century BC, in the Hippocratic literature, medical records were used to demonstrate the cause and course of a disease.
- These manuscripts were copied and, some times ,worked on by copyists " who sought to improve on the original " .
- In the 8-9th century , the HISBA (Arabic word meaning assessment , evaluation or quality control) system, involving quality control in the marketplace (scales, weights, produce and services) was a process by which government controlled everyday's services .

- ✓ The Hisba system (see " *The Handbook of Muhtasib* " by Shaizari) included also the control of how physicians perform their crafts .It could be summarized in the followings :
- ✓ The physician performs his duties.
- ✓ If the patient is cured , he gets his fee and bonus .
- ✓ If he(or she)dies , his relatives go the Muhtasib (an elected chief physician) who will decide if the physician performed according to the then prevalent criteria .

- This could be one of the first instance of peer review as far back as 8th century

Ishak Ibn Ali Arrahwi and its *Ethics of the Physician* : the first instance of a documented peer review

- In the ***ETHICS OF THE PHYSICIAN*** ,Ishak Ibn Ali Arrahwi (854 - 931) details how physicians were judged (reviewed) in their work by " peers " . The differents steps were as follow :
- The visiting physician should see the ill person as many times as needed .
- He should leave with his relatives a duplicate of his observations .
- He should also note progress (or worsening) of the case .
- He should not administer prohibited medecine (abortion , poison, amulets, etc,,,)
- He should not disclose personnal information nor be alone with women (a relative should be present) .
- At the end ,the physician's notes are examined by a local council (Medical Board) determining if he dealt with the case according to prevalent practices .
- In case of death, the physician could be sued for malpractice .
- These three instances are not ***per se*** peer review but a form of it . It shows that a form of certification , verification was in place even if the concept of information overload was not in vogue nor even existed .....

Modern peer review: a two goals process

- Peer review, as seen before , was present and took forms that could be related to what it is known now.
- At the beginning of what is actually known as scholarly communication , there was no " information overload " .
- The amount of what was *to* ***be published*** was far less than the space available .
- In fact what was published was elicited by " editors " who would try to fill their journals space .
- Most of what was published was " editors' opinion " and , *occasionally* , special committees were set up by societies to assess incoming manuscripts .
- It is the ever increasing amount of what was to be published that imposed two criteria or sieves :
  - A sieve that was NUMERICAL – QUANTITATIVE to choose what ***could be published in regard to space constraints*** .
  - A sieve that was QUALITATIVE choosing what was ***scientifically sound and worthy of being published*** .

Peer review :a contentious and source of endless debate

- These criteria (what **could** be published and what **deserves** to be published) needed mecanisms and " enforcers " (editors and reviewers) to reign on an ever increasing number of would be authors .
- For the space criteria (and before digital world) , the equation was (so to speak) simple and could be summarized in adapting what to publish according to available space .
- The other criteria , turned out to be more tricky to..... enforce !!!
- What would be published would obey to human ***judgement*** with all its specifities and .... ***BIASES*** ..... Biases have been since the inception of *modern* peer review (~ World War II) subject to an extensive and abundant literature.
- The ***gatekeepers,*** as they are known, hold an immense importance in what is published and what is considered as KNOWLEDGE .
- They are supposed to judge,appraise and ***give the seal , the imprimatur*** of what is acceptable and what is not because they have attained (or supposed to have) a level of expertise that qualify them to do so .
- That is what supposed to be but what it is is in fact is another matter .
- No matter how one reviews a grant , an article or a conference proposal, there will most likely be some sort of delictual behaviour either knowingly or not .

Biases: an endless, thorny and delicate debate

- Peer reviewers are humans (until recently .....) and humans tend to have preconcieved ideas and are the product of a society, a system, a culture , a methodology,an approach, a school of tought etc .....
- They view the world from a point of view that is hardly objective .
- They may (and most likely do) have ***biases*** that are either conscious or inconscious . They may see a piece of work from different angles and focuses.
- Biases could take different and numerous forms . The most common are :

- **Ad Hominem** (personnal) : when a reviewers has a good (or bad for that matter) opinion of the author .
- **Gender** : when a woman or a man's submission is treated differently (generally - according to research - women being discriminated against) .
- **National** : when a submitter's work is judged according to its origin (most common than thought especially for Global South authors) .
- **Institutional** : when a reviewer judges a submitter's work negatively or positively depending on the institution to which he/she belongs (a **Harvard - M.I.T or Stanford** author is **AUTOMATICALLY** good while a submission coming from an **...Algiers University 2 or Bobo Dioulasso University** author is most likely subpar)
- **Ideological** : when a reviewer holds strong ideas in any given subject and the submission goes against those ideas.
- **Aesthetic** : when a reviewer judges " the book by its cover ". A messy paper may look better when typed.

The solution ? Single,double,triple,third party, transferable,post publication AND open !!!

- To alleviate these problems , and due to the fact that reviewers could act and come out unscathed , there was to be changes from the most used version (single blind) . The following forms have been tried with different and, some times, conflicting results and outcomes .

✓ **Single blind** : The most commonly used, Author (s) is (are) not aware of reviewer(s), reviewer(s)is (are) .

✓ **Double blind** : Neither author (s) nor reviewer (s) know each other .

✓ **Triple blind**: Seldom used (technically hard to implement) . Editors ,authors and reviewers do not know each other. Supposed to allow extreme objectivity knowing the importance of editor's final decisions .

✓ **Third party**: Used to avoid conflict of interest or when a high level of expertise is needed . Performed by an independent third party, rather than internal reviewers or academic colleagues .

✓ **Transferable** : Happens within journals of the same group or network . After rejection , the editor may offer to transfer the *article and reviews* to another journal which could commission new reviews .

✓ **Post publication** : Occurs after the article is published. Comments and reviews could be made by the general public , experts or researchers on social media , blogs , online or discussion forums .

All these different forms have been used to attain an as objective as possible work . If improvement has undoubtedly occurred, peer review is still subject to critics and is in need of overhaul .

The Douglas P. Peters and Stephen C. Ceci study : a case of blatant bias

In a well known and controversial study (**Peer-review practices of psychological journals: The fate of published articles, submitted again**) , the two authors resubmitted a number of articles to the same journals that published them before with slight alterations .

- The results were , to say the least , startling and confirmatory of a blatant bias. Let's see what did come out of the study :

✓ The authors selected 12 *already published research articles* from prestigious American psychology departments.

✓ Each one of these 12 articles came from 12 highly ranked American psychology journals which had a high rejection rate (80%) and were non blinded.

✓ On second submission to the same journals that published them 18-32 months earlier , and after slight changes (names and institutions),the results were as follow :

➢ Of the **38** reviewers and editors , only **03** detected the resubmission.

➢ Of the **12** articles , **09** were processed through peer review.

➢ Of the **09** articles,**08** were rejected ,**16** of the **18** referees recommending rejection and the editors concurred.

➢ *Icing on the cake*, most of the reasons for rejection were " **serious methodological flaws** " .....

- Although widely criticized for its methodoligical design, this study showed that a clear institutional, ad hominem bias were present knowing that the reviewer knew the name of the submitter and his institution and in the resubmited version common names and fictive – **non prestigious**– institutions were used.

Open peer review : a panacea or just another fad ?

Due to the different hurdles peer review has encountered since its inception , and despite the numerous experiences that have been tried to fix it , it became obvious that a revolution had to be undertaken to overhaul it.

- With the Internet and its proclivity to allow access to a greater number , the idea to use it burgeoned.
- The thinking went – schematically and superficially – this way : **" since reviews- and reviewers- were shrouded in secrecy and that allowed all sorts of *fishy business* why not open it to everybody and make those in charge accountable not only to colleagues but to the whole community "** (and even beyond !!!) .
- Enthousiasm was prevalent at the beginning (and still is in some communities especially the scientific ones) , but OPR has shown also a number of " cracks in the system ".
- The process being new and revolutionnary in a world where secrecy and even a certain form of ***old boy network*** was prevalent , it elicited some resistance from those (at the top) who felt that it jeopardized their status.
- Peer review is then seen from two perspectives : those who have a stake at keeping it as is and those who want to change it feeling they are not given their dues and were discriminated against .

OPR and its different types

O.P.R. comes in different forms and types .They could be summarized in the following :

- **Open identities** : author(s) and reviewers know each other identities (either before or after publication) .
- **Open reports** :Reports are published with manuscript .
- **Open participation** : the wider scientific community is able and allowed to participate to the review .
- **Open interaction**:There is a DIRECT communication between author (s) , reviewers and editor .
- **Open pre-review manuscript**: Manuscript is availbale BEFORE peer review .

OPR and pros and cons

As any new breakthrough , OPR has had (despite its newness) its share of research that has determined its pros and cons . They could be summarized in :

- **PROS** :
  - Increased transparency and accountability.
  - Potential for higher quality reviews.
  - Opportunities for learning.
  - Exposure of conflicts of interest.
- **CONS:**
  - Risk of retaliation especially for ECRs.
  - Exposure to rude comments.
  - Potential for discrimination.
  - Stressful process.
  - Resistance for established researchers.

The Institute of Library and Documentary Science- University of Algiers : Fifty years and counting

- The Institute of Library Science and Documentation - University of Algiers was founded in 1975 and went through a number of administrative changes (from independant Institute to a department dependent of a Faculty then, since this year, as an Institute) .
- It is the first Library Science Institute in Algeria .
- The total number of students as November 2025 is around 1221 students between bachelors, masters and Phds .
- The total faculty staff is 68 between Professorsv, Lecturer , Senior Lecturers , Assistant and Adjunct teachers .
- It offers diplomas in Bachelor , Master and PhDs .
- There are three minors thaught : Library science , Information Technology and Archives .
- This survey's goal was to investigate how the Faculty at The ILDS saw the opening of a quintessential and primordial step in the making of science .
- More than that , the faculty being mainly young (ECRs) , in their late thirties and early forties , it was appropriate and advisable to see what these " **Digital Natives** " (Marc Prensky) thought of the process and how are they apprehending it as resarchers called upon to review and be reviewed .

The survey

- The survey was made up of twenty six (26)questions, some open and some closed .
- It was sent to the sixty eight (68) members of the faculty between March and July 2025 .
- Forty five (45) faculty members responded (66%) .
- Among these 45, four 04 did not have any peer review responses and indicated that they were never approached to review .
- The survey was made up of six sections which were :
  - General informations (age , degree, years in teaching) .
  - Degree of knowledge of peer review .
  - Experience with peer review .
  - Number of article peer reviewed .
  - Opinion about OPR .
  - Acceptance of name and review being public .

- **The results were as follow:**

General information

Most respondants were male at the rate of 53,7 % while female who responded represented 46,3% .

- When it comes to age , a little over half (51,2%) were over 50 years old while those aged 45-50 represented 19,5% and those in the 40-45 bracket represented 17,1 % which makes " older " member the majority of those answering .
- Most of those answering hold PhDs at the rate of 92,7 % .
- There are three main area of specialization at The Insitute which are :
  - Information Technoloigy (31,7%) .
  - Librarianship (29,3%) .
  - Archives (22%) .
  - The remaining 18 % are subspecialities such as information retrieval, information and bibliographic systems .
- Over 80 % hold Professor (39%) and Senior Lecturers (43,9%) position the rest is between Assistant teacher A (09,8%) and Assistant teacher B (07,3%)
- Last, when it comes to seniority , it breaks down to : + 25 years and 15-20 years both 24,4 %, 20-25 years (19,5%) , 10-15 years (17,1%) and 05-10 years (14,6%) .

Degree of knowledge of peer review

In this section , questions were asked to know how much faculty members understood peer review's different steps and different components . It is made up of seven questions ,The answers were as follow :

- Do you have any idea about peer review ? **82,9 %** said yes while**17,1%** anwered no .
- Do you know the different steps an article goes through before publishing ? **95,1** % said yes and **04,9%** no .
- Do you know the meaning of *reviewer* ? **97,6** % responded by yes and **02,4%** no .
- Do you know the meaning of *Editor in Chief* ? All the respondants (**100%**) answered yes .
- Do you have an idea about the most common peer review forms ? **68,3 %** said yes while **31,7 %** answered no .
- Do you know the meaning of Blind Peer Review ? **65,9** % said yes and **34,1** % said no .
- Do you know the meaning of Double Blind Peer Review ? **61 %** said yes and **39 %** said no .

- **Preliminary conclusions points to a quite good knowledge of different peer review's steps but also there is a surprising ignorance of peer review's forms (most common , blind and double blind)** .

Experience with peer review

This section will try to see what experience does the faculty member has with reviewing .

The following questions were asked :

- Have you had an opportunity to review a scientific article ? **80,5 %** said yes while **19,5 %** answered no .
- How many times did you review an article ? The answers were very diverse going from no review at all, to 01,02,03,04,05,10, more than 05,more than 10 and 20,The most common occurrences were :
  - ✓ Five reviews : **12,2 %**
  - ✓ Four reviews : **14,6 %**
  - ✓ Three reviews : **12,2 %**
  - ✓ No reviews : **09,8 %**
- Was the journal national, regional or international ?
  - ✓ National : **95,1 %**
  - ✓ Regional: **07,3%**
  - ✓ international:**19,5 %**

- **It seems that the faculty members have a limited experience either from the point of view of the process itself or the number of times reviewing occured . In the other hand , the faculty members seem also to have had a greater opportunity to review for local journals due to their lack of experience.**

Experience with peer review (part II)

- In this section, an open question and two closed questions were asked about experience(s) with the process.
- The **open question** was about the surveyed impression and what he/she learned . Many different answers that could be summarized into :
  - Most faculty saw in the experience an opportunity to be " **IN THE KNOW** " of what is being published.
  - Some simply said " **NOTHING IN PARTICULAR** " (sic).
  - Others did not have any experience in reviewing (6 cases) .
  - Some complained about the absence of advices how to review.
- The first **closed question** was ; " Did you feel free and protected when writing your review " ? (an indication to the role of the Editor in Chief in conducting the whole process), 80,5 % answered yes and 19,5 % no.
- The second **closed question** was : " Did you have biases toward the article to review " (especially if the name of the author was known ?), **24,4 %** responded yes while **75,6 %** said no.

- **This section about experience with peer review (especially the open question) showed that the Faculty lacked *hands on* experience especially that their experience is with local journals with low key criteria,They also a candid approach to biases as a quarter of them recognized biases**.

Opinion(s) around Open Peer Review

After questions pertaining to peer review in general , the survey asked questions specifically about OPR.

- The first question asked whether the faculty member knew OPR .The answer was a surprising **56,1 %** yes and a **43,9 %** no.
- The second question said : " Do you feel comfortable having your name and review available online" ?, the faculty members answered yes at the rate of **78%** and **22 %** no. They were also asked to (briefly) give reasons for their responses .We got eight (08) responses which we report completely as they are very important for the survey.
- In developing countries (sic), authors do not accept the rejection of their articles, even if they are incomplete or poorly written. Therefore, it is best for the review to be anonymous to avoid resentment and retaliation.
- Making the name available online may lead to sensitivities, and may also lead to a lack of objectivity in reviewing .
- Arbitration is inherently confidential, but in cases of injustice, a public announcement can be made initially within the framework of a committee.
- I don't prefer that because it can raise the problem of negative commentary and criticism, which can come from groups that do not present their ideas from a constructive, scientific, and critical standpoint.

Opinion(s) around Open Peer Review (Part II)

- It is preferable to keep the name confidential, whether it pertains to the author of the article or the expert, when publishing the report to avoid any disputes. (In some cases, the author of the article takes the matter personally rather than objectively) .
- No, to avoid suspicion.
- I do not have experience.
- I do not know.
- Another open question was asked : " Do you think that making peer review open reduces its subjectivity ? ", the answers again were very diverse .
- We can summarize them in the following :
- Ten (10) surveyed answered NO
- Ten (10) surveyed answered YES
- One (01) said MAYBE...
- Five (05) declared not to know
- Three(03) declared POSSIBLE
- The rest of answers combined a number of reasons and declared either yes or no adding reasons such as reviewer's seniority, knowledge and confidence, fear of retribution,etc....

Opinion(s) around Open Peer Review (Part III)

- Another question pertained to which extent the surveyed faculty knew about biases .They were asked to answer how much did know about them (forms of biases) . The answers were as follow :
- Institutional : **80,5 %** answered yes while **19,5 %** said no
- Personnal (ad hominem): **75,6%** answered yes while **24,4 %** said no
- Gender: **34,1 %** answered yes while **65,9 %** said no
- Religious: **46,3 %** answered yes while **53,7 %** said no
- National: **56,1 %** answered yes while **43,9 %** said no
- The following question was " do you think that opening up peer review completely will reduce biases and make it more objective?" and the surveyed faculty answered **73,2 %** yes and **26,8 %** no
- The last (open) question said :" Are you ready to try this new form of peer review ? Briefly explain your answer.
- **The result were quite surprising although the newness could explain it .Most of the faculty was ready for the experience adding they wanted more transparency and checks and balances,As surprising as it comes , eight (08) surveyed answered no and were not interested in experimenting open peer review .**

Opinion(s) around Open Peer Review (The best answer)

- Among the different answers regarding the readiness to undertake an Open Peer Review experience , an answer caught our attention . We reproduce it *in extenso* as it summarizes how a researcher ought to think towards new experiments and opportunities to learn:

- **“Yes, I am open to trying open peer review because it promotes transparency and accountability, and allows for direct and constructive dialogue between the researcher and the reviewer, which can improve the quality of research. However, I am aware that it requires safeguards to minimize the possibility of bias. These safeguards include adopting a clear code of conduct governing the interaction between the researcher and the reviewer, training reviewers in unbiased academic criticism, having an independent body oversee the impartiality of the reviews, providing researchers with a structured right of reply, and conducting periodic evaluations of reviewers to ensure the quality and objectivity of their work” .**

Conclusion(s) and final thoughts

- Peer review has been with us for a long time under unsuspected and different forms.
- Its formalization in the 20th century after the ensuing information overload led to its ever growing importance among academics.
- Promotion , grants and financial aid all depended on committees ruling on the feasability and worthiness and scientificity of projects.
- A fierce competition started to take place in which humans had to judge others ..... competitors !!!!
- Humans being ... humans some contentious decisions were taken leading to the process being criticized.
- It was mostly undertaken in secrecy and the reviewer could (almost) act unchecked and do whatever he/she wants.
- Voices rose asking for more equity and justice.
- The Internet in the early 21st century offered an opportunity to do away with the different biases the process was known for.
- If at first the change elicited (rightly) enthousiasm, it became obvious that the opening offered by The Internet created also issues not known in the paper and secretive pre Internet world of academia.
- Different experiences (**Faculty of 1000, Atmospheric and Chemistry Proceedings – ACP – , Journal of the Medical Internet Research – JMIR -, RIO Journal, Biology Direct or BMJ Rapid Responses ,PeerJ** etc ....) all represented new ways to peer review but ,as of today, the jury is still out and more research is needed to put the definitive stamp of approval on O.P.R.

Conclusion(s) and final thoughts (cont'd)

At the national level, peer review has not been studied nor investigated in any profound and exhaustive manner.

- Researchers publish (locally and internationally) without being aware of the intricacies and behind the scene of the process.
- The local members of the teaching staff at Algerian Universities (and The ILSD) are more interested in publishing for promotional reason.
- There has been a race to publish encouraged by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research which aims at bettering Algerian Universities global ranking.
- The survey's results have shown a keen interest in participating in the process with surveyed members showing an acceptable level of knowledge of *knots and bolts* of peer review.
- Regarding O.P.R., it seems that the faculty members at The ILSD have ambivalent opinions. While they showed a quite opened mind when it comes to O.P.R., they showed also a sort of reluctance to fully implement it using somehow outdated approach.
- Due to the making of the said faculty (mostly ECRs , researchers born into a digital environment), it was expected that the results were more positive to O.P.R.
- One explanation is that the issue (O.P.R.) being somewhat innovative , the surveyed faculty did not fully grasp all the dimensions associated to the issue .
- There seem to be a compelling need to deepen the investigation (sampling and questions asked) to be able to have a clearer and more encompassing picture.

Takk for oppmerksomheten

Thank you for your attention

شكرا على حسن الاصغاء

Merci pour votre attention

Gracias para su atención

Vi ringrazio per l'attenzione

Vielen Dank für Ihre Aufmerksamkeit