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Why Peer Review?

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WHY PEER REVIEW?

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Co-Editor, Communications in Information Literacy

In last issue's editorial, my co-editor Chris Hollister wrote at length about our fairly non-traditional business model and our open access policy. This time around, I would like to explain and offer a modest defense of a much more traditional practice of ours: peer review.

Some substantial and very reasonable criticisms of peer review have been made over the years. Scholars and researchers have concerns that the peer review process can stymie original thinking and force substantial new discoveries into fringe publications. These are not new or unfounded worries.

In David Shatz's 2004 book, *Peer Review: A Critical Inquiry*, the author documents a number of weaknesses with the peer review process. He points out examples of well-cited papers, sometimes describing work that went on to win major awards and accolades, which were

originally rejected during review. He also describes reviewers who are often out of touch with new research, and who routinely promote work that supports their own views and reject papers that disputes their beliefs.

In the era of instant publishing online, these criticisms take on new flavors. Peer review can substantially slow down the publishing process, and open access to the research allows criticism to be open and visible as well. Shatz and other critics have suggested several alternatives to pre-publication peer review. These alternatives include post-publication peer review, or open peer review, where manuscripts are published to the Web immediately, but with the ability to post comments and follow-ups in an open dialogue. Author and reviewer anonymity are eliminated in favor of timeliness and transparency.

Times of transition, like the one we are in now, can be difficult. Newer scholars see all the flaws in older systems like peer review, and recognize none of the benefits, while the established faculty now espouses the orthodoxy of peer review unwaveringly and without acknowledging its many faults. When Chris and I first talked about *Communications in Information Literacy*, we started with an honest appraisal of our scholarly literature, of the library science journals themselves. We came to the following conclusion:

Anyone can get published in the library literature.

We have a lot of unnecessary journals in the library literature. When a peer-reviewed academic library journal publishes an entire issue consisting of nothing but blog posts as a cheap publicity stunt, it is safe to say that journal is no longer making any worthwhile contribution. If Chris and I are ever that desperate for content, we'll do the more honorable thing and cease publication.

In the meantime, CIL enjoys a healthy acceptance rate, hovering right around 35 percent. This is due in no small part to our reviewers, who are aggressive in their support of our editorial integrity, and who likewise take seriously their commitment to us and to our authors. Those manuscripts we accept benefit from the frank and honest criticism given by our reviewers. Peer review, in the final analysis, makes our product better. Peer review helps our authors with their own professional growth and development, and it makes them better writers.

Peer review is still, for better or worse, the standard yardstick used for tenure. Faculty committees that control faculty promotion and

tenure expect to see peer-reviewed articles in the vitae of the librarians they review. And let's be clear: Librarians often find themselves starting at a disadvantage with committees of "teaching faculty" who are not terribly sympathetic to the idea of "library faculty" to begin with. Peer-reviewed articles get librarians promoted. Peer-reviewed articles get librarians tenured.

That doesn't mean that we're blind to its faults. In fact, under the mounting criticism of peer review, we believe it is necessary not only to defend its use in our journal, but to consider additional routes of publication that this journal can use. For example, an upcoming theme issue will include invited manuscripts. Another manuscript that was submitted recently for peer review is being reworked into an editorial feature. Additionally, with the previous issue, we began our first regular feature column, and with the next issue, we will begin allowing comments on the CIL site, so that registered users may post moderated comments about our articles. We believe that opening up a dialogue with our readers in this way can only make the scholarship that comes out of our journal even better over time.

We will continue to investigate other means by which to get the best scholarship in our field out to our readership, in whatever form works best. We will continually examine our use of peer review and consider alternatives, and we will look for ways to balance the traditional needs of academia against the realities of improved access to scholarship. Your support drives our efforts to continually improve, and we appreciate it.

Communications in Information Literacy publishes invited editorial content, including reviews of books and other media, interviews with select figures in the information literacy community, and guest editorial and opinion.

If you are interested in contributing editorial content to the journal, please inquire with the Editors (editors@comminfolit.org).