

# I Don't Peer-Review for Non-Open Journals, and Neither Should You

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“The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man.”

—*Maxims for Revolutionists*, George Bernard Shaw (1903).

In the twenty years since the Budapest Open Access Initiative (BOAI, 2002) defined the term “open access” (OA) and laid out the unanswerable case in its favour, the growth of OA has been inexorable. Legacy publishers, dependent on the revenue stream provided by subscriptions, have repeatedly attempted to stem this tide, and have certainly succeeded in delaying it—to no-one's benefit but their own. But OA progresses despite this rearguard action, especially in recent years through the adoption by many major research funders of the Plan S declaration (Plan S, 2018), that open-access publication is a condition of grant funding. At the time of writing, over half of all newly published papers are open access either immediately or within a few months (Piwowar, Priem, & Orr, 2019), and the proportion continues to increase rapidly.

Yet non-open journals persist, and in some fields their imprimatur remains sought-after. Like all academic journals, they run largely on the goodwill of volunteer academics like you and me: we contribute the papers, perform uncompensated peer-reviews, and for most journals also provide editorial services—either free, or for a token honorarium. For open-access journals that exist to advance a field of study, these donations of time and professional expertise make sense: participating is part of how we contribute to the community that we benefit from, and in doing so we help to make high-quality scholarship available to the world. But it makes no sense to offer these services to paywalled journals—especially those owned by corporations that exist to make money for their shareholders. (The four biggest academic publishers all have profit margins dwarfing those of Apple or Google. This is not a criticism; merely an observation.)

Almost all open-access advocates are on board with the idea of submitting their manuscripts only to OA journals. Most will also agree that editorial work should

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also be done in the service of up-and-coming OA journals rather than to prop up the reputations of those that remain paywalled. But withholding peer-review from non-open journals is more controversial. Even OA campaigners sometimes raise objections. These I now propose to rebut.

### **1. Declining review requests hurts authors as well as journals.**

Let us admit at the outset that this is true. Researchers who submit their work to a paywalled journal have their reasons, good or bad, and may well not care about the issues that make other scholars reluctant to review their manuscripts. They just want to get their work published, and I am a block in their road. It's regrettable. If I could hurt the non-open journals without hurting the authors, I surely would. So this is a tough situation that requires a tough decision.

But it comes down to this: a combination of historical accidents has manoeuvred us into a position where the interests of authors are directly opposite to those of legacy publishers: in short, authors want their papers to be read by everyone with maximum convenience, and publishers want to prevent them from being read except by an elite few who are able and willing to pay. Whatever damage I may do to authors through a reviewing boycott is a tiny proportion of the damage that non-open publishers do to them every time they hide their work away in a walled garden.

And there is this: I want authors to have more incentive to submit to OA journals. If their manuscripts are able to get reviewers in a timely manner at OA venues but not at those that reside behind paywalls, that's good: it encourages such authors to use OA journals out of enlightened self-interest.

### **2. Editors might give manuscripts an easy ride when reviewers are difficult to find.**

I've seen this argument made, but it doesn't convince me. I don't think a competent editor at a well-run journal would throw up his hands and say "It's hard to find reviewers, let's just accept the paper." An incompetent editor at a badly run journal might—but why would I want to prop up a journal like that, anyway?

### **3. Declining review requests is a silent protest that will not be noticed.**

This would be a legitimate complaint if all we did was turn down review requests and walk away. Instead, when I decline to review, I write separately to the author and to the handling editor, explaining to both of them why I have declined, and encouraging the author to seek an OA journal instead. (See Taylor, 2017, for an example.) To my pleasant surprise, the response to these messages has always been positive from authors, and often even from editors.

It can be difficult to write about these issues without seeming overwrought and hysterical, but let me try an analogy. The economic sanctions against South Africa



in the 1980s, intended to bring about the end of apartheid, certainly hurt the very citizens that they were intended ultimately to help. But most people would agree that history has vindicated those sanctions. It was a hard decision to make. No doubt plenty of anti-apartheid activists, with the best intentions, opposed the sanctions because of their immediate negative effect on people on the ground. But, happily, longer-term thinking won out. We need to be similarly far-sighted.

Is it hyperbole to compare paywalled research with institutionalised racism? Yes, of course. But maybe not by so much as we might assume. The developing world is beset by appalling diseases that more developed countries don't even need to think about, and vulnerable to famine and drought. Who knows what fruitful research might have been done—by scientists in those countries and even by unaffiliated amateurs—if only the foundational research was freely available to them?

Open Access isn't just a First World Problem: it potentially affects health and access to food and water for millions, or even billions, of people. Ending paywalled research is both important and urgent: declining to review for non-open journals is part of that.

Finally, think about the opportunity cost of peer-reviewing for paywalled journals. In other words, what is the value of the other things you could be doing with that time? You could be advancing your own research, and publishing it openly. You could be peer-reviewing for OA journals. You could be volunteering for their editorial boards. In the end, these are the actions that will advance and democratise scholarship. It is far better to invest our time and energy into these than in helping to preserve the husk of an obsolete business model for the profit of corporations.

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