Open or Blind Peer Review: Which Is Better?

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The traditional blind peer review process is supposed to encourage open and honest critiques of a publication. Since the reviewer doesn't know who the authors are, the reviewer will not be biased either for or against them—neither lauding a colleague with an overly rosy review, nor trashing a competitor from personal spite. And since the authors don't know who the reviewers are, the reviewers may return the most scathing comments without fear of starting a feud with another member of the academic community.

Such is the theory of the blind review, but like many theories it breaks down in practice. Even if they are not told who the authors are, reviewers can often deduce their identity from the topic and writing style. More fundamentally, does a blind review really encourage objectivity? More often, does it not have the opposite effect? If a reviewer wants to suppress a competitor with a hostile review, the cloak of anonymity gives him the perfect shield. He is invisible. He has no accountability. Why shouldn't a reviewer be required to sign his review? Wouldn't this encourage a more reasoned critique?

In recent years a number of journals have experimented with various types of open peer review processes in an attempt to improve on the blind review. Nature tried out a hybrid review process in 2006, giving authors an option of having their manuscripts published online during the peer review process, with any comments being published along with

the reviewers' names. The experiment was a flop: only 5% of authors opted for an open review and only half of these papers received any comments.

Other open review experiments have been more successful. Atmospheric Chemistry and Physics (ACP) has a review process much like the one Nature tried out—an open, informal review of the manuscript on the internet and a simultaneous formal process. Authors may reply to the open critiques and their replies are posted. At the end of the formal/informal review process a decision is made on whether to publish the paper or not. ACP is a successful journal and is well regarded.

Why did ACP's open review process succeed where Nature's failed? Probably because ACP is a relatively young journal, founded in 2001, whereas Nature is one of the oldest scientific journals, dating back to 1869. New journals tend to attract authors that are willing to try out innovative ideas in publishing such as open review. While I do not favor a totally open review process, a hybrid process seems to combine the best of both worlds to some extent. We will probably see more of it in the future.

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