

Presentation:

"The Pros and Cons of the Peer Review Process in the Field of Academic Publishing"

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15TH GW ETHICS IN PUBLISHING CONFERENCE

WHY ETHICS MATTER

October 9 - 10, 2025

Hybrid Format:

GW Alexandria Learning Center and Virtual

Hosted by the Graduate Program in Publishing, College of
Professional Studies, George Washington University

Conference Sponsors:



"The Pros and Cons of the Peer Review Process in the Field of Academic Publishing"

Description:

This presentation offers a critical and constructive analysis of the peer review process as it functions within the field of academic publishing. The session will explore the traditional strengths of peer review -- ensuring scholarly rigor, providing expert feedback, and establishing credibility -- while also addressing major critiques, including systemic bias, reviewer inconsistency, and inefficiencies in knowledge dissemination. Particular attention is given to the evolving landscape of academic publishing and how emerging models -- such as open, post-publication, and collaborative review -- offer promising paths forward. By contextualizing the peer review process within the domain of publishing, the presentation invites discussion and deliberation on how the field can lead academia in peer review reform.



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“The Pros and Cons of the Peer Review Process in the Field of Academic Publishing”

Presenter:

Philip J. Boutin, Jr. is a publishing scholar, author, and educator with over 13 years of higher education experience and a research focus on publishing ethics, peer review reform, and author identity. He is currently pursuing a MPS in Publishing at GW and holds a Ph.D. in Business Administration with a concentration in Marketing from the University of Tennessee, an M.S. in International Business and an M.B.A. in Marketing from Southern New Hampshire University. He has authored or co-authored over 42 academic works and frequently presents on topics related to scholarly communication, editorial strategy, and the evolving landscape of publishing in the digital era.

Session Aim & Fit



- Critical, constructive analysis of **peer review** as it functions in **academic publishing**
- **Peer Review:** core quality assurance (QA) for academic publishing
- **Identify Strengths:** rigor, expert feedback, credibility
- **Address Critiques:** systemic bias, reviewer inconsistency, inefficiencies (slow knowledge dissemination)

Session Aim & Fit



- **Spotlight:** open, post-publication, and collaborative/consultative review
- **Goal:** practical steps and standards-aligned reforms so publishing can lead broader reform and cross-disciplinary change and improvements in peer evaluation



- **Evaluate** the strengths and weaknesses of traditional peer review within publishing research.
- **Identify** at least three emerging models of peer review and explain their potential benefits and limitations.
- **Reflect** on how publishing studies can model innovation and ethical best practices in peer evaluation.
- **Apply** insights to improve peer review protocols in your academic or editorial context.

Learning Outcomes

Presentation Agenda



- 1. Why Peer Review Still Matters**
- 2. What Traditional Peer Review Does Well**
- 3. Major Critiques**
- 4. Emerging Models**
- 5. How Academic Publishing Can Lead Reform (5 steps)**
- 6. Conclusion**



- Community's core mechanism for allocating **epistemic trust**
- **Varied Implementation:** single-anonymous, double-anonymous, open/signed identities; closed vs published reports; pre- vs post-publication timing (*Ross-Hellauer, 2017*)
- **Core function:** expert evaluation designed to **improve and validate** scholarship (*Ross-Hellauer, 2017*)

Why Peer Review Still Matters



- **Shared vocabulary** ANSI/NISO Z39.106-2023 clarifies model elements for authors, reviewers, and readers and allows journals to label their chosen model (*NISO, 2023*)
- Widely recognized **ethical expectations for reviewers** – confidentiality, disclosure and management of conflicts of interest, and respect for intellectual property (*COPE, 2017*)

Why Peer Review Still Matters

What Traditional Peer Review Does Well



- **Rigor**: broad quality gains after review/editing (*Goodman et al., 1994*)
- **Expert Feedback**: sharper claims, clearer methods, improved reporting – even when outcomes unchanged
- **Credibility Signal**: “peer-reviewed” still functions as signal of reliability for readers, editors, and institutions

*Major national reports on reproducibility & replicability emphasize strengthening assessment & transparency, **NOT** abandoning peer review*
(*National Academies, 2019*)



1. **Systemic Bias** (*prestige, identity, affiliation*)
2. **Reviewer Inconsistency** (“*reviewer lottery*”)
3. **Inefficiencies** (*delays, serial revisions, issue-bundling*)

Major Critiques



- **Prestige Advantage:** single-anonymous reviewing favors famous authors and elite institutions; double-anonymous reduces that advantage (*Tomkins, Zhang, & Heavlin, 2017*)
- **Field Variation:** *masking* helps in some areas – e.g., increased women’s first-authorship under double-anonymous review in ecology and evolution (*Budden et al., 2008*)

BOTTOM LINE:

*Identity policies **NOT** ethically neutral; shape outcomes & should be chosen deliberately based on evidence & on community served by journal*

Critique #1: ***Systemic Bias***



- Sense that **outcomes** hinge too much on which **reviewers** you happen to get
- **Low agreement** when different reviewers assess same work = NSF proposals and NIH applications
- **Fairness concerns** for authors and **complexity** for editors (*Cole, Cole, & Simon, 1981; Pier et al., 2018*)

TAKEAWAY::

*Inconsistency is **NOT** just nuisance; undermines predictability & confidence in process*

Critique #2: ***Reviewer*** ***Inconsistency***



- **Prolonged publication lags** often tied to serial revision cycles and legacy issue-bundling practices (*Björk & Solomon, 2013*)
- **Slow Time-to-Publication:**
 - ❑ delays cumulative science, &
 - ❑ can hinder careers tied to timely outputs

In fast-moving or policy-relevant areas, slow time to publication can also keep evidence from stakeholders who need it

Critique #3: *Inefficiencies*

Emerging Models



1. **Open Peer Review** (*identities and/or reports*)
2. **Post-Publication Review** (*publish first, formal public reviews*)
3. **Collaborative/Consultative Review** (*delays, serial revisions, issue-bundling*)



Emerging Model: *Open Peer Review*

- **Umbrella term** for practices such as revealing reviewer and/or author identities and publishing review reports themselves (*Ross-Hellauer, 2017*)
- **Transparency** can be introduced with mixed but manageable trade-offs (*van Rooyen et al., 2010; Walsh et al., 2000*)



Emerging Model: **Open Peer Review**

- **Transparency** can be introduced with mixed but manageable trade-offs (*van Rooyen et al., 2010; Walsh et al., 2000*)
 - ❑ Asking reviewers to sign and post reviews can increase decline rates and review times
 - ❑ Less consistent effects on quality scores
 - ❑ Creates visible corpus of evaluative scholarship, improves civility and accountability

Many journals find publishing anonymized decision letters or complete review histories is tractable first step; surfaces editorial reasoning for readers & creates teachable artifacts for authors, reviewers, & students

Emerging Model: *Post-Publication Review*



- **F1000Research:**

- ☐ manuscripts published after editorial checks and then formally reviewed in public by named experts
- ☐ reports and author responses openly available
- ☐ indexing follows successful review

- **eLife “Reviewed Preprints”:** citable preprint with public reviews and editorial assessment (*eLife*, 2024; 2025)
 - ☐ decoupling evaluation from binary accept/reject decision
 - ☐ providing hiring and funding committees with transparent signal about work

Emerging Model: *Post-Publication Review*



- **Benefits:**

- ☐ accelerate access to findings
- ☐ make judgments legible to readers

TRADE-OFFS:

- ☐ *Norms vary by field*
- ☐ *Committees **MUST** be educated about how to interpret non-traditional signals*



Emerging Model: *Collaborative/ Consultative Review*

- Some publishers (e.g., *Frontiers*) convene authors, reviewers, and editors in structured online forum (*Frontiers, n.d.; Frontiers, 2014*)
 - ❑ reconcile conflicting critiques
 - ❑ converge on actionable revision plan
 - ❑ reduce # of serial cycles required to reach decision
 - ❑ consultative review advances procedural justice when executed well

*When executed well, consultative review advances procedural justice: even when outcomes are **NOT** favorable, participants perceive process as coherent & fairer*



1. **Label Model:** precisely (NISO taxonomy) at article level (*NISO, 2023*)
2. **Balance Equity & Transparency:** default to double-anonymous identities while adding open elements (e.g., anonymized decision letters, full review histories) (*Tomkins et al., 2017*)
3. **Reduce Delay:** continuous article publishing, strengthen initial desk checks for fit and methods, cap number of revision rounds, monitor time-to-decision statistics (*Björk & Solomon, 2013*)

How Publishing Leads Reform (5 Steps)



4. **Pilot Community-Facing Tracks:** reviewed Preprints/F1000-style with predefined success metrics (e.g., revision quality, reader uptake, indexing outcomes) (*eLife*, 2024; *F1000Research*, n.d.)
5. **Structure the Conversation:** for complex methods submission, use consultative rounds to resolve contradictions among reviews, measure impact on inter-reviewer agreement and revision counts (*Frontiers*, n.d.; *Frontiers*, 2014)

How Publishing Leads Reform (5 Steps)

Conclusion



- **Keep What Works:** rigor, expert feedback, credibility signal (*National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, & Medicine, 2019*)
- **Fix What Doesn't Work:** systemic bias, inconsistency, delay (*Björk & Solomon, 2013; Cole et al., 1981; Pier et al., 2018; Tomkins et al., 2017*)

Conclusion



- **Start Now:**

- ☐ label models (*NISO, 2023*)
- ☐ adopt equity-minded identities (*Tomkins et al., 2017*)
- ☐ publish decision rationales (*van Rooyen et al., 2010; Walsh et al., 2000*)
- ☐ streamline avoidable frictions (*Björk & Solomon, 2013*)
- ☐ pilot open/post-publication/collaborative formats (*eLife, 2024; eLife, 2025; F1000Research, n.d.; Frontiers, 2014*)

Conclusion



Academic publishing field can credibly lead broader reform across all publishing disciplines (e.g., book publishing, newspaper/periodical publishing, online publishing)

That leadership will not only improve academic/scholarly journals but model transparent, fair, & efficient peer evaluation for use in other academic & scientific disciplines (e.g., medicine, health sciences, natural sciences, engineering, computer science, psychology, economics, mathematics)

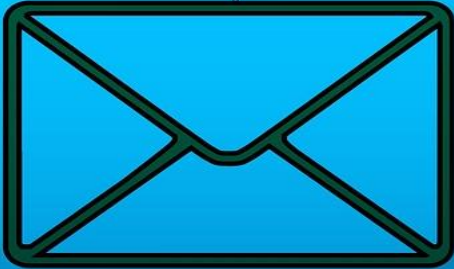
A stylized illustration featuring a blue graduation cap with a red tassel on the left. Below the cap is a stack of three books. The top book is light gray with a red bookmark. The middle book is orange. The bottom book is dark blue with a yellow bookmark. A white rectangular box with a thin brown border is centered over the books, containing the word 'References' in a dark blue, italicized serif font.

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