Publicizing the Peer Reviewer: Legitimacy and Quality of Scientific Publication

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Publish cannot be disconnected from scientific knowledge and has a social function of canonisation, categorisation and legitimisation

(Bourdieu, 2001; Carvalho, 2000; Guerreiro-Ramos, 1981):

- “Reflecting the productivity and/or quality of a scientist, with the general notion that publication in a higher level journal would indicate high level research or that many papers would broadly indicate high productivity” (Teixeira da Silva, & Dobránszki, 2014, p. 23);
- Relevant for a successful scientific and academic path through scientific recognition:
- “The ever-increasing competitiveness in research (“publish or perish”) in these current times of limited grant funding opportunities incentivizes researchers to ‘fragment’ results from a single study into multiple publications, or to publish identical data sets redundantly” (Stahel, & Moore, 2014, p. 2)

The researcher’s objective is to use the publication to give visibility to the knowledge produced and to be accepted by the peers and the scientific community.

In the dissemination, the most commonly accepted way is through articles, which are expected to have recognised scientific quality (Callaham, & McCulloch, 2011; Galbraith, 2015; Teixeira da Silva, & Dobránszki, 2014; Costa, 1988; Merton, 1977).

There is a growing number of publications claiming to be scientific. Yet, the fact that they are indexed does not necessarily guarantee quality: open access logic, with unequal quality, and which, in the words of Stahel and Moore (2014, p. 2), are “sprouting like mushrooms all over the globe”.

How to guarantee the scientific quality of what is published?

Results:

Through analysis, review and critic of their peers’ work, scientists aim to ensure that only research that is part of research programs legitimised by the scientific community is published and recognised. The most commonly accepted modality of scientific quality control of what is publishable takes place through peer-review:

- ensures an *a priori* control through the evaluation by peers in the area of the article, and which legitimises the editorial decision whether to publish it or not;
- Peer reviewers act as gatekeepers for the publication (Houry, Green, & Callaham, 2012), in a game always marked by interpretative uncertainty (of each of the actors involved) (Petitat, 1998; Leandro, Leandro, & Nogueira, 2011).

Peer reviewer quality is not ensured:

- Peer reviewers – mostly volunteers – are of varying quality (Houry, Green, & Callaham, 2012);
- “The exponential increase in the number of manuscripts submitted for publication worldwide overburden the capability of available qualified referees to keep up with reviewing requests and to ensure timeliness and quality of their respective evaluations” (Stahel, & Moore, 2014, p. 1);
- “many of the new generation open-access journals may tend to accept a lower threshold of peer review quality” (Stahel, & Moore, 2014, p. 3);
- In some journals, the authors may indicate a reviewer, who may not have competence or not be reliable in his/her assessment of the paper;
- The difficulty in controlling peer-review quality is increased, given that the quality of the reviews by the same evaluators does not tend to improve (Callaham, & McCulloch, 2011);
- Reviewers training does not attain lasting success, not even through additional formal feedback from editors or other reviewers (Callaham, & McCulloch, 2011; Houry, Green, & Callaham, 2012);
- “Contrary to many editor’s assumptions, the quality of peer reviewers cannot be predicted by their academic rank, formal research training, grant funding, or other traditional markers of academic achievement” (Houry, Green, & Callaham, 2012, p. 1).

Conclusion:

- Peer review of articles published as *a priori* control continues and will continue to be central as an element of justification and legitimation of their publication.
- The publication of these peer reviews, with the identification of their author, expresses a scientific *ethos* of participation and accountability of the various actors in the process of production and dissemination of scientific knowledge.
- It may be a critical factor of accountability and subsequent legitimacy of the scientific quality of what is published, by enabling greater control and demand in what is publishable and published, in a control, also, *a posteriori*.

This entails rethinking the role of reviewers in this process, by the visibility that they will assume, as they will continue to be the gatekeepers of the legitimacy of scientific publications.

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