

Editorial

Peer Review and Churchill

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I've written a large number of articles over the last forty years, but rather few research papers going through the peer review or refereeing process. One of them came to mind when I read a paper we're publishing in the current issue, by Claudiu Heteliu and others, on possible 'coercive citation'—if that's an unfamiliar expression [1], it will become clear soon...

One of the reviewers of my paper basically thought it was ok, but very much thought it needed a couple of citations to other work. The editor (correctly) thought this made it so obvious who the reviewer was, he revealed his name—unnecessarily, since it was of course the author of the works to be cited. I didn't mind since, while I didn't think they were necessary, they weren't irrelevant either, and I had no real objection to giving him a little extra publicity. You could call this a very modest or moderate version of 'coercive citation' since the reviewer may have felt it was at least possible that the article should be rejected if I didn't comply.

Now fast forward a decade or two, to the beginning of the time when Impact Factor (IF) became the most important metric supposedly determining the quality and status of journals. One or two major publishers were quick to see how this could be 'gamed' such that they persuaded some of their editors to ask authors, as part of the review process, for more citations in their papers to other papers in the same journal. Although it is possible to filter out such self-citations, it nevertheless boosts the IF—a more direct and slightly cynical, if not sinister, example of coercive citation. Still, that's at the journal level. Heteliu's article raises the possibility, now that we use a number of metrics to 'rate' individuals, that it may be happening at that level too, e.g. to boost the h-index of some editors and other individuals.

As it happens, that's not the only potential peer review problem we feature in the current issue. John Wyndham (no not the famous science fiction author—he's long dead) has written about some of the editing and reviewing issues in obtaining publication of evidence of alternative explanations of how 9/11 occurred [2].

Of course, problems with peer review are nothing new. There is now a vast literature on the topic—books, papers, and international conferences, and many studies indicating various types of bias—institutional, gender and more as well as discussion on the various types—single or double-blind, post publication etc. Many proposals have been made on other systems and some have been and are being tried. It's worth pointing out that the vast majority of researchers will nevertheless, and almost certainly correctly, retain their faith in the value of peer review. As I have said many times, peer review is important for the reviewer as well as the reviewed.

So what does all this have to do with Sir Winston Churchill? Well, you may have guessed, but it's worth pointing out that he had a number of both important and unimportant connections to publishing and communication, not least in being awarded the 1953 Nobel Prize for literature. He clearly had a way with words and, I'd always thought, a taste for their precise meaning—as in the quote where he is told, when drunk, 'Mr. Churchill, you smell'—'No Madam, you smell—I stink'—it turns out that was Dr. Johnson, but let's not that spoil a good story. When I did a Master's in Information Science, and referencing abstracts and how to be concise, much was made by the lecturer of Churchill's request

to his friend, the physicist Frederick Lindemann, to summarise, such that he could understand, on one sheet of paper, how atomic energy might be developed.

But, of course, it's his quote on democracy which, for many, resonates in the context of peer review—adapting slightly 'it's the worst form, except for all the others'.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

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