

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Peer review revisited.

An examination of the SCM reviews 2014/15

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1. Scope

This paper is about peer review in the German field of communication study and focuses on the journal *Studies in Communication | Media* (SCM). Based on the assumption that peer review is essential for an academic discipline and a core communication element within the field, it examines the role and function of reviews for the production of knowledge. The German communication field started paying attention to issues such as social science citation index and impact factor only 15 years ago. This development, which soon included the establishment of peer review, did not pass by without leaving a mark. Today, some colleagues claim that peer review would promote mainstream research and the reviews would often lack of quality. Moreover, peer review would turn out to become a serious problem when journal articles exclusively serve as sources of reputation in the field. These critical remarks can also be detected in the research on peer review, often combined with the conclusion that this is “a system full of problems but the least worst we have” (Smith, 2006, p. 178). Analyzing 130 reviews of paper submissions to SCM from May 2014 to December 2015 goes beyond the communication discipline’s pilot studies on peer review, since it does not look for “deadly sins” and “virtues” of writing journal articles (Neuman, Davidson, Joo, Park, & Williams, 2008). It rather examines the reviews’ quality, the reviewers’ role perception, and the consequences of peer review for the German field. Therefore, it first and foremost contributes to communication study’s self-reflection.

2. Peer Review as Communication in the Field

According to Lutz Bornmann (2007), research on peer review is fragmented between the North American school, which draws on academic norms such as universalism and critical skepticism and considers this process as a guarantor of good scientific practice, and social constructivism emphasizing the local and social dimension of academic knowledge. From this latter perspective, peer reviewed publications are the result of communication processes between authors, reviewers, and editors (Hirschauer, 2004). In other words, reviewers not only know about their influence on the paper and the decision of accepting or rejecting

it. They are also aware of the fact that at least within the journal's circle of editors, their identity is known – or in the case of SCM: might be guessed. To put it differently again, the SCM reviews can be conceptualized as a form of semipublic communication in academia, which mainly informs about the ruling quality standards in the field. Following the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu (1998), an academic field is a social microcosm with hierarchies and constraints, organized around the principle opposition between dominant and dominated agents. Within this scheme, the position of academic field agents is up to their reputation, a kind of symbolic resource that can only be granted by other agents in the field, who are at the same time competitors. Thereby, the field's power pole (in this case, all academics selected by SCM editors to review paper submissions) defines which research area as well as which questions, theories, and methods are regarded as legitimate. However, according to Bourdieu, the monopoly of scientific authority is also a party to the dispute. Consequently, it is no surprise that peer review is criticized because of its alleged interest-driven promotion of mainstream research, since it reflects the dominant agents' habitual reflex of conserving power structures in the field and giving credit to those scholars who follow the same evaluation rules of scientific practice.

3. Research Design

As mentioned, the research material of this study consists of 130 reviews of 55 paper submissions to SCM (110 from the first round, 18 from the second round, and two from the third round). Here, it should be noted that not all of them contain a clear recommendation about how to deal with the paper. Moreover, leaving beside the cases with one or three reviews and the review pairs without a decision of whether accept or reject the submission, only half of the reviewers from round 1 did not provoke a split vote. Being conscious of the limits of the research material, the aim of this study, again, is not to indicate the factors that make a paper submission successful or not (at least not in the first place). Instead, it draws on a qualitative approach with four research questions that derive from the literature on peer review, the theoretical perspective, and the material itself: What is the standard of a review in German communication study? Which role perceptions can be distilled from the SCM reviews? Which role does the review process play in the field's knowledge production? And what is the function of peer reviewing in the German discipline's development?

4. Results

With the support of a chain of arguments and organized into four theses, the result section informs about the place of peer review in the German communication field at this very moment. According to the before mentioned research questions, these perspectives can be distinguished: quality and formal characteristics of the SCM reviews, role perceptions of the SCM reviewers, role of the review process for the production of knowledge, and function of peer review in the discipline's development.

Thesis 1: The peer review is an established process in the German speaking field of communication study. The scholars who are asked to review a paper normally know about the expectations, even though no formal guidelines or examples are provided. However, not all reviews are blind. Since the authors of a paper sometimes are directly addressed, it can be assumed that there is an estimated number of unreported cases: Many reviewers may guess or probably even know from which research group the submission originates.

Thesis 2: According to the principle of collegueship, writing a review for SCM means constructing oneself as a sympathizer of the authors and an advocate of the scientific community. The reviewers claim the status of a co-expert, or the status of a layman who does not know much about the concrete research area or the methods that were used, but a lot about communication study. The rhetoric is strictly positive, even if the submission is categorically rejected.

Thesis 3: The reviews are a central element of the discipline's internal discussion and improve every submission. The reviewers not only feel responsible for editing tasks (orthography and grammar, citation style, missing references, figures and tables), but also deliver ideas regarding the papers' theoretical perspectives, research designs, analyses and interpretations. Put differently, in their role as gatekeepers, reviewers play a decisive role in the knowledge production of communication study.

Thesis 4: The peer review reproduces the structures of the German field of communication study for several reasons: First, connection to the field's internal discussions is the main relevance criterion. Furthermore, the reviews demand an extensive summary of the field's literature, a contribution to the current state of research, and compliance with the discipline's standards considering form and content. Last but not least, the chance of acceptance crucially depends on the way the submitters deal with the critique from behalf of the reviewers. Thereby, the most important quality criterion at the moment is mastering all methodical tools. In this spirit, the reviews especially pay attention to confirmability, the research design, and, in particular, data analytical finesse.

In summary, it can be argued first that the 130 reviews written for SCM between 2014 and 2015 contribute to the discipline's discourse with an exhaustive knowledge that is supposed to exceed the editors' expertise by far. Thus, giving up peer review cannot be an option for a growing academic field (all the more since the scientific community, through its reviewers, carries out editing tasks and therefore not only relieves the voluntary editors but also upgrades the formal quality of the journal articles). Second, almost all examined reviews deal with the submitted papers in a serious, detailed, objective, and fair way (even if they finally recommend rejecting them), which is another argument against the sometimes suggested open peer review model. Nevertheless, one has to admit that peer review indeed turns out to produce a conservative effect (cf. Hanitzsch, 2016), since it supports the dominant agents (as well as the theories and methods at the field's power pole), whereas it hardly cares about societal relevance.

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