

Peer Review

# Review of: "Open-Access Publishing and the Reviewer Crisis: Rethinking Incentives for Quality Peer Review"

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‘Incentivizing’ reviewers has been a hotly debated issue for a number of years now, if not decades. Among the recurring topics have been financial incentives, and as frequently as they have been suggested, their utility has been debunked. This article again proposes solutions that have been shown time and again to be counter-productive. Of the many reasons why financial incentives will lead to the opposite of the desired effect, I will limit myself to just three:

1) The author appears to assume that the senior scientists he feels ought to do more reviews do not receive any salary and are hence driven by financial motives in their decision-making.

However, while of course salary scales vary between countries and institutions, a good ballpark estimate of gross annual salaries for tenured professors in most science-leading countries is the equivalent of around 100,000 US\$ or € in local currency. For most of these potential reviewers, this income puts them in the top 10 percentile of earners or higher in their respective countries. Thus, these potential reviewers are time-restricted rather than money-restricted.

Assuming the author’s suggestion were implemented and reviewers received monetary payments for their reviews, this would signal in the most unambiguous and unmistakable way that reviewing is no longer part of a salaried academic’s work. There is no conceivable way in which one can signal more unambiguously and clearly that something is not part of your salaried job than to propose to pay you for it, as if you were not already being paid to do it.

Consequently, the offer to pay professionals who already have more money than time is simply a signal that they do not have to have a bad conscience any more if they decline invitations for review: not only can reviewing not be considered part of their academic duties any more, but, moreover, there are many

undersalaried junior researchers who really need the money to make ends meet. Consequently, taking on a paid review and pocketing the money would deprive a deserving scholarly poor of their income. Reviewing for senior scientists in rich countries would become ethically questionable.

2) The financial incentives the author proposes would not only make publishing even more expensive but also increase the profits of the corporate publishers. Two years ago, I calculated that paying reviewers a barely adequate hourly salary of only 200US\$ for each review would approximately double the costs of a scholarly article and increase publisher profits from today about 1,000US\$ per article to about 2,000US\$/article:

<https://bjoern.brembs.net/2023/02/how-about-paying-extra-for-peer-review/>

At the very least, the author needs to a) justify the low salary and b) address the skyrocketing prices/profits.

3) The evidence suggests that the most prestigious journals, those that can still recruit the most senior reviewers the author is trying to incentivize to review more, publish the least reliable science:

<https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/human-neuroscience/articles/10.3389/fnhum.2018.00037/full>

At the very least, the author needs to explain how recruiting (assuming, against expectations, that this would work) more reviewers with a track record of facilitating the publication of unreliable science, together with the huge increase in prices outlined above that his proposal will entail, can benefit science in any tangible way. It is completely unclear in the current version of the manuscript how increasing the unreliability of science and simultaneously doubling the prices of scholarly articles can benefit anybody other than corporate publishers?

For these reasons alone, I would encourage the author to, instead, focus on more systemic solutions to the many problems of our journal system, where the reluctance of peer reviewers arguably ranks quite low on the importance list:

First, scholarly literature that is not reliable is not worth arguing over. Without reliability, scholarly literature devolves into a corpus of fiction. Recruiting competent reviewers is important for this task, but the evidence suggests that the current journals are not well-suited for this endeavor.

Second, the scholarly literature, at least the section that is reliable, needs to be affordable. Currently, the average price the public is paying for a scholarly article exceeds publication costs by a factor of 5-10:

<https://f1000research.com/articles/10-20/v2>

The author's proposal would at least double these prices, when they should be coming down by at least 80%.

Third, as explained above, a major contributing factor as to why reviewers decline reviews is time, not money. The proceeds of hyperinflation in journal pricing, however, do not go into making reviewing easier and less time-consuming, but into surveillance publishing:

<https://journals.publishing.umich.edu/jep/article/id/1874/>

The author's proposal would grant the publishers more money to spy on their users, instead of freeing up reviewers' time to be able to accept more reviews. Journals need to invest in facilitating reviews, not in surveillance technology. The author does not elaborate on how he plans to convince the corporations to change their investments.

Thus, I would encourage the author to focus on how the relatively minor aspect he focuses on relates to the big problems in our scholarly literature. For this, he may want to refer to the literature where this has been attempted, e.g.:

<https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/10.1098/rsos.230206>

and contribute new solutions such as examples of alternative non-financial incentives that have been successful in attracting senior reviewers and proposals on how current peer review processes could be improved without increasing costs or publisher profits.

## **Declarations**

**Potential competing interests:** No potential competing interests to declare.