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Transparent Review at the European Journal of Neuroscience: *experiences one year on*

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In the interest of transparency in scientific publishing, at the Society for Neuroscience meeting in San Diego on the 15th November 2016, the editorial board decided to institute a transparent peer review system for the European Journal of Neuroscience (EJN). For new submissions from that date onwards, all peer-review documents, including all editorial correspondence, are available as a supplementary document attached to the published paper. This decision was a long time in gestation and the subject of much discussion and argument, but we were both committed to open review and transparency in science. In addition to the openness, we were also committed to giving credit where credit is due. We had already introduced a system to reveal the names of the Section Editors dealing with our papers, but as reviewers do an enormous amount of work for the journal and the scientific community, we considered it important that they are recognised for it (see Foxe & Bolam 2017). Despite our fears, apprehension, and nervousness, we ‘bit the bullet’ and ‘pressed the button’ in November last year. At the time of writing, we are approaching the one-year anniversary of this new transparent system, so what are our experiences, have any of our initial qualms been born out, have our hopes been realised?

Fears

- We won't be able to engage reviewers! This was our greatest worry; people would be afraid to review, to be revealed and to see their comments in print. *This has definitively proven not to be the case.* Since setting up the transparent review process we have invited 3847 scientists to review papers for EJN and only 19 opted to tick the box to say that they decline because of the transparent review system.
- We won't get new members to join our board of Section Editors or Reviewing Editors. *This has proven not to be the case.* No one has declined to become a Section Editor on the basis of the review system, and in a recent expansion of our Board of Reviewing Editors, only a single person out of over 40 invitees declined on the basis of the transparent review process.

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- Accepted Article
- The careers of young scientists will be destroyed by senior scientists on whose papers they have commented negatively. As far as we know *this has proven not to be the case*. This was a fallacious fear anyway - most scientists at every level are supportive of accountable review and transparency.
 - Battles and vendettas would arise between authors and reviewers. Again, as far as we know *this has proven not to be the case*. And again, a fallacious fear, as rigorous, fair, and unemotional discussion is part of the scientific method. Battles and vendettas have no place in science!
 - The quality of reviews will fall. *This has proven not to be the case*. The reviews that we receive are just as rigorous and fair as they were before the change. If anything, the quality of the reviews has improved as the reviewers know that they will be publicly accountable for their comments.
 - The reputation of the journal will fall as a consequence of all of the above! The opposite has proven to be the case; we are recognised for our pioneering efforts and offered encouragement from all sides.

Hopes

- We are transparent! We are proud to be at the forefront of the movement in science to increase transparency and to improve and refine one of the bedrocks of the scientific method, ‘the peer-review system’.
- The transition between the two systems was seamless, although it does require more work in the editorial office. However, the model we have chosen is probably the least onerous both to the reviewers and the office and was the easiest to adopt.
- Reviewers are more prompt in returning their comments and our impression is that their reviews are more carefully constructed, more thoughtful, and of a higher quality.
- To actively take part in peer-review is our duty as members of the scientific community and defenders of the scientific method. However, it takes a considerable amount of time and intellectual effort. Transparent reviewing, together with the Publons system that we have adopted, documents and gives recognition to those contributing to the peer-review process.

All-in-all, we consider that we have successfully and smoothly moved into a transparent review process. We consider that the review documents give important insights into the development of a paper and have received only encouragement and support for our transition. We urge other journals to join the ever-increasing number of journals truly committed to transparency in science.

The essence of this editorial was originally published as a blog associated with ‘peer-review week’ https://hub.wiley.com/community/exchanges/discover/blog/2017/09/13/transparent-review-at-the-european-journal-of-neuroscience-experiences-one-year-on?elq_mid=9422&elq_cid=781791

References

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