Peer Review

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themselves decide whether to submit their work to Open-Access journals, whether to de-
posit it in Open-Access repositories, and whether to transfer copyright.

Conventional journals can experiment with Open Access to their back runs, to back
issues after a certain embargo period, to all new articles, or to selected new articles, in
order to learn the methods and economies of Open-Access publishing. But scholars
needn’t wait for conventional journals to make these experiments, and needn’t per-
suade them to accept Open Access as a superior, or even desirable, alternative. The
Internet has already given scholars a chance to reclaim control of scholarly commu-
nication. For the first time since the journal appeared on the scene in 1665, price needn’t
be an access barrier to this critical body of royalty-free literature. For the first time since
the rise of the commercial publishing of scholarly journals, scholarly communication
may be in the hands of scholars, who answer to one another, rather than corporations, who
answer to shareholders. The only question is when scholars will fully seize this beautiful
opportunity.

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Project Director at Public Knowledge, and the author of the SPARC Open Access News-
letter.

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formation Society for November 11, 2003, and the SPARC Open Access Newsletter for

Peer Review

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This month’s headline, as you’ve doubtless guessed, is peer review. By the time you reach
my scribble you may have heard enough … already. I sure hope not. Peer-review, along with
its alternatives, is an important topic, not the least of which is its potential impact on li-
brary access to information. If you haven’t guessed by now that the library access
landscape is changing, you may need medical attention. The writing is on the wall, and your
future does not bode well.

For too many years peer-review, in graves of academe (a phrase I bor-
row shamelessly from Richard Mitchell’s witty book), has been the touchstone of greatness, the
benchmark of honor, the honor of tenure, the … ah, well you get the picture. With near-sneer-
ing-nose superiority, academe has held that writ-
ing in a peer-reviewed journal is tantamount to

guarding the grail, gilding the lily, gorging the
grandiose. No, wait, that last part doesn’t work.

On the other hand, maybe it does, so read on.

In recent years peer-review writing has taken

it on the chin, and the punch (some would call it

a sucker-punch) has all but knocked it out.

Before getting to that very interesting story, there is an-
other, the one of a tenure-

wannabe who decided to
test the waters by taking

renowned papers, sending

them, slightly altered, to

various presses and waiting.
The rejection slips came in sur-
feit. It seems that publishing

presses, academic and otherwise,
didn’t want something wonderfully well-writ-
ten, only something that would sell. All our cor-
respondent managed to do was prove how in-
credibly difficult it is to get published. He also
proved, by way of ruse, that it is equally difficult for
Dickens, Melville, Hemmingway

and others to make it, in barely disguised form, to
the light of published day.

continued on page 60
For those who may not quite get through all the mumbo-jumbo, gobbledygook, pseudo-scientific language with anything like meaning, Sokal claims that gravity and the eternal world are simply linguistic constructs and therefore not real. If you believe this for one minute, we’ll go test it atop a large building by jumping head first over the side. Mind you, first. It reminds one of the argument that C.S. Lewis once had with an opponent who cried, “Therefore this podium is not real, the world is not real and our life is phantasm,” or words to that effect. When Lewis stood up to rebut, he replied, “I would counter my opponent’s arguments, but it’s so unfair to do so when he’s not here to defend himself.”

What makes this story important, even critical when discussing peer-review is the now palpable possibility that even in the world of peer-review — an academic staple — what ends at the final product may in fact be worthless gibberish, tainted not only by partisan politics (from the left and the right) but vouched for by those who must, should and are paid to know better. (For more, see only Sokal and Bremerton’s Fashionable Nonsense mentioned above, but also Alan Charles Kors and Harvey A. Silvergate’s The Shadow University: The Betrayal of Liberty on America’s Campuses [Free Press, 1998].) It means in effect that we have no real recourse to information that may not be jaundiced in some manner, and in ways that materially alter its intrinsic and extrinsic value.

For years I thought our only recourse was to rely on articles for which authors are paid, and by and large I still think that to be true. I find it hard to believe that a magazine would pay $250 and up for pure nonsense. But even these sources can be tainted, not so much by politics (though there is that possibility) but by finances; it’s now generally well-known that what was first to go in editorial departments when budget cuts came were the once famous fact checkers. Most magazines and publishers rely on authors policing themselves; and this reliance is hardly foolproof, as evidenced by Bell Laboratories’ Jan Hendrik Schön, a physicist touted for a Nobel Prize, who, as it turns out, fabricated much of his research.

So where does this leave us? It leaves us wanting in many ways. Wanting for reliable resources of information. Wanting for avenues that are trustworthy and irrefutable. But there is also a silver lining: it leaves us knowing that librarians and libraries are without substitute in the quest for accurate, authentic and honorable information.