Publons: Giving Credit to Peer Reviewers

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During the second Peer Review Week in 2016, there were extensve discussions on how the institution of peer review is far from perfect. The problems with peer review in scientific publishing are well known: it is inefficient and tedious for both editors and reviewers, it is inconsistent, there is no accountability for reviewers who are cruel or self-serving or abuse the system, and reviewers receive no payment or reward for their work. A variety of efforts have emerged to address these issues. In 2012, a New Zealand based scientist Andrew Preston and his business partner Daniel Johnston launched Publons as a one-stop shop for peer review activities. The name comes from a term used in academic publishing to refer to the minimum amount of publishable material.

Fast, Efficient, Transparent Peer Review

Their overall aim with Publons is to make the lengthy, expensive, and thankless task of scientific peer review into a process that is fast and efficient for everyone, and which gives real credit to reviewers. To do this, they offer editors and publishers a platform for tracking and managing papers in the peer review workstream, and the ability to find and contact appropriate reviewers for new research papers. The platform also allows editors to track the performance of the papers they publish in terms of ratings by Publons users and web traffic.

They also aim to improve the transparency of the peer review process by offering editors and reviewers the ability to publish full reviews, name reviewers after publication, and discuss both reviews and papers on the Publons platform. Allowing access to the full review text means allowing access to the full story of the paper. Readers are able to see exactly what reviewers recommend, whether the authors ignored recommendations and judge for themselves if these recommendations were appropriate.

This commitment to transparency also undermines those reviewers who may be tempted to abuse the system, make unfair recommendations or write unnecessarily cruel and personal comments in their reviews—all common problems in the closed peer review system. Bad or cruel reviewers will be identified. Finally, publishing reviews

allows readers, scientists, and editors to identify inconsistencies in reviewing and find ways to improve the rigour of peer review. All these aims and features have the potential to improve the peer review process in scientific publishing immensely. However, the benefits that have really caught the attention of the wider scientific community have been offers provided by Publons to individual reviewers.

Recognition for Review

The primary benefit of Publons for peer reviewers is receiving tangible credit for the work they do. On Publons, this happens in two ways. Firstly, the platform gives every researcher who signs up a profile page, on which they can record their reviewing activities. This acts as an online record for their CVs and career development of the voluntary work that they do for the scientific community. Publons profiles can also be connected to ORCID profiles, contributing to a complete record of all scholarly activities. Publons also allows researchers to create a clear report of activities that can be quickly and easily added to a CV.

Secondly, Publons has its own, platform-based system of giving credit. It gives reviewers "merits" for various levels of reviewing activities, which act as both a reward and a motivation. These credits act essentially as points, adding a slight competitive aspect to the Publons platform. When a reviewer states that they have completed a review, they get one merit. When that review is verified by an editor, they get two merits. A further two merits are awarded if the reviewer or editor publishes the full content of the review. Finally, users can gain additional merits by endorsing other reviews, and receiving endorsements for theirs.

Post-publication review is a rising phenomenon in scientific publishing that is also awarded merits on Publons. Thus, Publons reviewers are encouraged to engage with one another, to support good reviews and to note poor ones. They are rewarded for both pre- and post-publication review and for discussing published papers. Thus, reviewers are given, in essence, a quantitative score demonstrating how much time and energy they voluntarily contribute to their scientific field.

In addition to these basic forms of credit, Publons launched the Sentinels of Science awards in 2016. These awards honored those individuals who had recorded the highest number of reviews in 2016, and the editors who handled the most reviews. The overall winner completed 661 reviews which would otherwise have gone unnoticed and unappreciated and hence received 1,971 Publons merits for this.

The Future of Publons

The Publons platform is not without criticism. Some researchers have criticised the gamification of peer review, and the implication that peer reviewing activities should be mandatory rather than voluntary. They have wondered how this will change the face of peer review in unintended ways. However, these voices remain in the minority and major publishers have partnered with Publons, including Wiley, Sage and ScholarOne. They were also founding partners in the now annual Peer Review Week and are clearly

at the forefront of the credit for peer review debate. The founders have expressed the belief that their platform is improving peer review and will continue to do so. Certainly, the future looks bright for Publons and peer review.

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