The Past and Present of Humanities Peer Review

Guest Editors
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Peer review, the institutionalized evaluation of scholars and their outputs by others working in the same field, has become an essential component of knowledge production and research assessment in the humanities. Through peer review, scholarly communities distinguish "good" from "bad" research and determine what is publishable or who is fundable. Peer review serves as a mechanism for quality control as well as an increasingly controversial method of gatekeeping (Hoenig 2015; Teplitskiy et al. 2018; Tight 2022).

Despite its importance, the history of peer review in the humanities remains poorly understood. While some sociological scholarship exists on the contemporary criteria and procedures of peer review in the humanities (Ochsner, Hug, and Daniel 2016), there has been almost no scholarship on what peer evaluation looked like before external, double-blind procedures were introduced at journals and grant agencies, and on how review practices changed over time (but see: Fitzpatrick 2011; Pontille and Torny 2015; Rose 2019; Verbergt 2023). Moreover, most historical and sociological research on peer review has focused on the natural and social sciences (Burnham 1990; Csiszar 2016; Moxham and Fyfe 2018; Horbach and Halffman 2018; Merriman 2021; Forsberg et al. 2022). While this body of literature has highlighted important historical changes in the practices and functions of scientific peer reviewing, its insights cannot be straightforwardly applied to the humanities.

The grand narrative on the history of peer review has indeed been written entirely from the perspective of the history of science. Historians of science have traced the "pre-history" of peer review or "refereeing" back to seventeenth-century Britain, when natural philosopher Henry Oldenburg employed it as an optional and ad hoc practice, while others tend to seek its origins in eighteenth-century societies and their journals (Moxham and Fyfe 2018). It was only after the Second World War, in the USA of the 1970s, that "peer review" first emerged as an authoritative concept and became increasingly associated with scientific legitimacy (Baldwin 2018). During the following decades, the academic and public authority of external and, later, blind peer review expanded, becoming a standard practice in a variety of academic disciplines and across the globe.

However, this prevailing history of peer evaluation falls short with respect to the humanities, pragmatically defined as a broad cluster of historically and culturally oriented disciplines including but not limited to history, literary studies, archaeology, philosophy,

theology, musicology, philology, art history, media studies, and linguistics, for (at least) two reasons.

First, because historians and sociologists of peer review have heavily focused on editorial peer reviewing (e.g. Lalli 2016; Clarke 2016; Fyfe et al. 2020), and to a lesser extent, grant reviewing (e.g. Jacobs and Huistra 2019; Gläser and Serrano Velarde 2018; Serrano Velarde 2018; Frodeman and Briggle 2012), other forms of peer review that have been crucial within the humanities, such as post-publication book reviewing, have been overlooked (Ten Hagen 2022; Pleshkov and Surman 2021). Related to this, the historical literature on peer review remains silent on how humanities scholars judged each other's work before the contemporary paradigm of peer review was introduced. It is therefore unclear which ideas and norms guided peer evaluation, and which "technologies of evaluation" (Lamont 2012) were being used.

Secondly, historians of peer review have yet to address how peer review's current institutionalized conventions (e.g. anonymity, impartiality) and objects of evaluation (e.g. article manuscripts, grant applications) gained a foothold across disciplinary cultures. How did new scientific notions and practices of peer reviewing interact with existing evaluative norms and technologies within the humanities, which may have relied on alternative conventions (e.g. familiarity, openness) and focused on different objects of evaluations (e.g. publications, book proposals)? This question is particularly relevant considering the strong tradition among postwar humanities scholars of critically reflecting on, even leading protests against, neoliberal and STEM-driven assessment regimes (Pontille and Torny 2010; Wheeler 2011).

To address these issues, this Special Issue proposes a more comprehensive engagement with the history of peer review in the humanities, attentive to multiple (historical) forms of peer evaluation as well as to processes of appropriation across disciplinary and national boundaries. Such a balanced historical inquiry into peer review will moreover generate insights of relevance to all historians and sociologists of knowledge interested in the history of scholarly gatekeeping. Since both the "humanities" and "sciences" were and remain part of a shared historical (epistemic) context, with humanistic fields like history and philology even setting the model for the sciences (Daston and Most 2015; Kurtz 2021; ten Hagen 2022), it is impossible to fully understand the past, present, and even future of peer review without taking the humanities on board.

Key topics for articles

We invite scholars to submit proposals for papers that explore the historical development of peer review in the humanities, with a particular focus on the period from the nineteenth century up to the present. We welcome historical and sociological contributions that promise to offer new insights into the historical and/or recent developments of peer review in the humanities, and that help situate current evaluative practices within a broader historical context. Moreover, this special issue underscores the global significance of the topic of peer review, encouraging the study of humanities peer review in various (historical) settings around the world.

Proposals may explore the social, cultural, political, and epistemological aspects of the recent history of peer review in the humanities. We invite potential contributors to consider topics related to questions such as:

- How have peer review practices in the humanities historically *differed* from those in the natural and social sciences? And to what extent have "scientific" models of peer review been appropriated and negotiated within the humanities, or perhaps vice versa?
- How have peer review processes in the humanities historically been *organized* (internal vs. external reviewing, informal vs. formal reviewing, varieties of technologies of evaluation, ideals and assumptions embedded in peer evaluation)?
- Who were allowed to act as reviewers, and who were *excluded* from this role? To what extent were such inclusions and exclusions informed by historical conceptions surrounding gender, race, and ethnicity? And how, if at all, did the personal backgrounds and beliefs of reviewers, editors, and chairs of funding or hiring committees, as well as the authors/applicants being reviewed themselves, shape the outcome of peer evaluations?
- How has the organization and practice of the peer review process *changed* within the humanities, and which (national, transnational) actors and/or institutions, ideals, or other push-factors guided such changes?
- Which *forms* of (internal and external) peer review have existed within the humanities, and what has been their relative *function*? How, for example, has the relation between pre-publication and post-publication peer review shifted historically?
- What has been the *impact* of peer review on the production of knowledge in the humanities (e.g., in terms of its reach, publication speed, (editorial) quality, collaboration, etc.)?
- How was the *cultural authority* of scholarly peer review established and challenged, both within academic circles and in the public sphere? Related to this question, how have ideals and practices of peer review *spread across geographical boundaries*, for example between Euro-American contexts and non-Western contexts?

Submission guidelines

Extended abstracts (max. 1000 words, not including the bibliography) should be submitted by **March 15, 2024** to mariegabrielle.verbergt@ugent.be and s.l.tenhagen@uu.nl. Authors whose article proposals have been accepted will be asked to submit a preliminary outline of their paper of approximately 3000 words in length. This outline will be discussed during a workshop scheduled for the summer or fall of 2024. The submission deadline for full papers (6,000-9,000 words) is **November 15, 2024**.

Ad hoc advisory board members

Melinda Baldwin (University of Maryland)
Alex Csiszar (Harvard University)
Aileen Fyfe (University of St. Andrews)
Julian Hamann (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin)
Didier Torny (Mines Paris - PSL, Centre de Sociologie de l'Innovation)
Joris Vandendriessche (KU Leuven)

Literature

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