



Commentary

Being a Critical Professional: The Importance of Post-Publication Peer Review in Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

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Last year, Stewart Brower, co-editor of the open access journal *Communications in Information Literacy*, defended the peer review process. He argued that despite its flaws, peer review helps librarians' careers. "Peer-reviewed articles get librarians promoted. Peer-reviewed articles get librarians tenured." While this is true for academic librarians in institutions that promote librarians and grant them tenure based on articles published, most library and information professionals are not in such positions, so why should library and information professionals care about peer review?

Lately, it seems as if everyone is talking about peer review, its benefits and its weaknesses. By peer review, they usually are referring to pre-publication review by experts ("peers") in the field, sometimes confidential ("blind"), sometimes not. Recently, *Nature* reported on a hoax article that passed through peer review (Gilbert) and the *New York Times* featured a story about ghostwriting and the medical literature (Singer). What's interesting about

these news items is that they question the effectiveness of the peer review process.

Peer review was never intended to detect fraud. Its original purpose was to evaluate research in order to assist the author in improving it and the editor in deciding whether or not to publish it (Zuckerman and Merton 68-75). Although the process has evolved since its beginnings in the mid-17th century, there has been no standardization of peer review across journals, and its use did not become widespread until the mid-19th century (Weller 1-4). As Brower also noted in his editorial, pre-publication peer review is still effective when considered relative to its original purpose: it assists editors in the selection of manuscripts and assists authors in improving their research and writing skills.

Post-Publication Review

Back to why librarians should care about peer review in our own field. In addition to concerns about fraud, some question the

effectiveness of peer review in weeding out substandard or useless research. I would argue that instead of placing this burden entirely on the pre-publication peer review and editorial processes, we should transfer some of it to the post-publication phase. If we admit that not all original research that gets published is flawless, then surely we can take the responsibility of evaluating what we choose to read. There are two things to evaluate when considering research: its validity or accuracy and, when appropriate, its applicability to current practice.

Librarian as Critic

Librarians and information professionals, who have a masters degree and sometimes more advanced education, are equipped to do at least some evaluation of published research. We are trained in basic statistical methods and, in some cases, qualitative design. We also benefit from our work experience. For those who lack more advanced critical appraisal skills and are interested in acquiring them, online courses, readings, and professional development workshops are available. All librarians, as professionals, have a duty not just to read peer reviewed research, but to engage in post-publication review of their own. Not to do so but instead to take everything one reads at face value, is irresponsible.

There is a much published researched available, and scanning recent tables of content or search results then deciding to read something is already an onerous task. Choosing to read an article based on its title, abstract, or author is a first step in evaluating a study's relevance, or applicability. But it is essential to remain critical while reading and interpreting the report. "Critical" in this sense does not mean negative, but carefully judging, in the academic sense, as in "critical thinking."

Traditional publishing dictates a linear process where a manuscript is submitted, reviewed by peers, revised, edited and eventually (hopefully) published. This rather rigid format persists in our field. Despite technological

advances in format and speed to improve access, we still submit manuscripts which undergo the same linear process, and what emerges is considered something of a "final product." But this does not mean that the so-called final product is the last word. Librarians can and should respond to these research reports, whether by reflection, discussions with colleagues or in journal clubs. And of course, we can respond to the original authors.

Evidence Summaries in *EBLIP*

Formal critical appraisal is a form of post-publication peer review. Evidence summaries published in *EBLIP* are structured abstracts accompanied by critical appraisals of original research reports. These summaries are written by peers with expertise in specific domains and research methods. Each evidence summary is a synopsis of an individual research article and a commentary on its validity and applicability. The ultimate goal of publishing evidence summaries is knowledge translation, or putting research into practice. But another goal is for library and information professionals to think critically and to engage in a conversation related to the research.

Instead of trying to fix pre-publication peer review or replace it, we should consider it as just one aspect of the review process. After an article is published, professionals and researchers should be encouraged to engage with it – to be critical and reflective. Evidence summaries are one way to continue the conversation begun by the original publications. The summaries are not the final word either. It is hoped that evidence summaries will encourage *EBLIP* readers to think more critically about the original research and to engage in conversation about it.

In the coming year, *EBLIP* will begin efforts to inspire these conversations in two ways: first, by notifying the authors that their publications have been critically appraised in the journal, and second, by encouraging these authors and *EBLIP* readers to add their own comments to evidence summaries using the Online Journal

System's "add comment" feature on each Web page.

Peer review is not perfect, and neither is most research. Library and information professionals can and should evaluate published research openly and constructively in order to create conversations and facilitate putting research into practice. By building on evidence summaries, *EBLIP* hopes to start these conversations and facilitate the transfer of evidence into library and information practice.

Works Cited

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