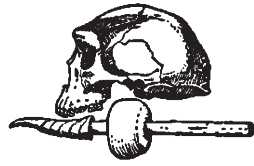


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Editorial

Wheels Coming Off?: Critically Assessing the Peer Review Process in Southern African Archaeology

Peer review has been generally defined as the process through which peers with similar competences to the work they are tasked to review pass judgement to the Editorial Team, advising them on how best to respond to the manuscript under consideration. As Smith (2006: 178) alluded, “peer review is at the heart of the processes of not just medical journals but of all of science. It is the method by which grants are allocated, papers published, academics promoted, and Nobel prizes won.” The significance of peer review, therefore, is very high. Peer review can be taken as a self-policing process by those involved within a certain discipline to ensure that what is published has been evaluated by experienced scholars in the field.

According to Iltis (2017: 214) “Peer reviewers must maintain confidentiality, fairly assess work, and carefully review materials to ensure that it is scientifically promising and ethically acceptable”. To ensure such confidentiality and fairness, some publication avenues allow peer reviewers to be anonymous so that they are able to be more forthright in their engagement with the submitted manuscripts. There have been many debates over the anonymity of peer reviewers but that discussions falls outside the scope of this editorial.

The definition of who is a peer and what is a review should be open to much scrutiny. Is our collective definition of a peer someone involved in exactly the same kind of research (potential competitor) to the author(s)? Is anyone involved within the same discipline as the author(s)? Or should we consider a peer to be someone seen as an expert on methodological aspects? In the same way we can be critical of who is a peer, we should ask similar questions about the definition of the review. Is this a ritual through which someone says ‘Yes, I like the paper and thus you can publish it?’

Having been involved with the *Bulletin* for almost a decade, I must acknowledge that some of the peer reviews have left a lot to be desired. In the same way, there have been those that have been extremely detailed and helpful in generally improving the original manuscript submitted. During my time, I have noted extremely negative reviews that may be seen as personal attack’s driven by factors beyond the confines of the manuscript at hand. These questions aside, no one can dispute the challenges with the peer review process, in the same way that its significance is widely noted.

Integrity is an important element in the peer review process. Authors and peer reviewers must always ensure that honesty and transparency is safeguarded. Within this framework of honesty and transparency, “reviewers must assess whether the authors describe their methodology in sufficient detail, cite relevant literature, interpret their results appropri-

ately, draw conclusions that follow from their results, appear to have engaged in any scientific misconduct, and are contributing to the literature” (Iltis 2017: 216). The review of manuscripts is thus aimed at improving papers worthy of being considered for publication. However, this process can also play a critical role in rejecting papers that are representative of bad science. There is, therefore, a lot of faith given to peer reviewers by editors.

As history has shown us, the peer review process has not always been convincingly successful in bringing integrity to all published manuscripts (De Groote *et al.* 2016; Mouton 2017; Mouton & Valentine 2017). This means that the faith that has been given to authors and reviewers has not always been deserved. As a result, we have seen scholars fabricating their data, and by extension, findings emanating from their ‘manufactured’ studies. Similarly, some scholars have ‘mastered’ the publishing game and are thus able to gain ‘more mileage from only a few ideas’ that are continuously mined for many publications.

Furthermore, no one should dispute the misuse of peer review to ‘shut’ the gates of knowledge production (Ndlovu 2009; Schmidt 2009). This has been a reality of life not just in archaeology but in other disciplines as well.

Challenges aside, there can be no dispute that there is a meaningful value that should still be attached to the peer review process. It is even more so because academics still do not have an alternative to the existing peer review process. Thus, the *Bulletin* is not an exception to the use of such a self-policing mechanism amongst academics. More importantly, it is always a high possibility that the expertise needed to adequately review the submitted manuscripts does not exist amongst the Editorial Team members. This makes the peer review process for the *Bulletin* and other publication forums even more important in providing the much needed academic advice.

Southern African Archaeology and the Peer Review Process

Having presented the significance of the peer review process, especially in the absence of alternative methods of validating research, we as the southern African archaeological community are faced with a fast-growing threat. This is a threat against what is generally agreed to be a meaningful self-policing mechanism. Peer review is becoming cumbersome and fails to deliver on what is expected from it. As I shall discuss, some scholars are failing to respond to our invitations for review, adhere to the given timelines, or even provide us with meaningful reviews that are good for the growth of the discipline. Besides all these challenges with the peer review

process, I still regard it to be the best mechanism that we currently have as editors of the *Bulletin* to ensure that what is published is of high merit.

With specific reference to the *Bulletin*, I now want to focus directly on the peer review threat we are facing as the Editorial Team.

The *Bulletin* has a long, very solid history of publishing manuscripts that have been at the centre of growing the discipline of archaeology. The journal enjoys international accreditation as well. Judging by the submission rate, we are a healthy journal that has over the years become a solid forum for the production of archaeological knowledge within Africa, but more specifically southern Africa. The range of our authors is also vastly varied, even though there are still fewer manuscripts being submitted by African scholars.

A growing threat to the success of the journal over the decades is the poor response we get from reviews to provide peer reviews on manuscripts submitted for possible publication in the journal. In my experience, this is particularly the case with South African based scholars. We approach peer reviewers based on the content of the manuscript at hand and the expertise such peer reviewers possess within their specified sub-field of archaeology. This increasing poor response is deeply concerning.

Within the context of this challenge, I will broadly categorise scholars who are behind this concerning phenomenon with regard to peer reviews into three groups. In the first group are peer reviewers who never respond to our invitations. In my view, they do not even see any value in responding with a negative reply. Ignoring invitations becomes an approach for them to say 'leave me alone'. Their non-response may also be based on them not attaching significance to the peer review process. I have thus learnt to avoid those that have become perennial offenders in this regard. The second group is defined by those who do respond and accept our invitations to provide peer reviews, but then that is the last we hear from them. Reminders are sometimes responded to with many promises, until the time when our further follow ups are ignored without a positive output to the benefit of the *Bulletin*. The third group is composed of peer reviewers who do accept the invitations and submit reviews. However, such reviews are generally very poor, not giving confidence to the editor that the manuscript has been critically engaged with to offer meaningful advice to the Editorial Team.

All these three groups are a threat to the *Bulletin*. For the first category who simply ignore our invitations, I always wonder why they do not perform such unpaid duties yet they are beneficiaries from this scholarly system when their manuscripts go through the same peer review process. Or might the issue be that reviewing for the *Bulletin* does not give the same international prestige as other journals found in the north? Equally so, it has become less of a satisfaction to successfully appoint reviewers as per our guidelines. This is because I have seen an increase in reviewers who accept our invitations but do not provide us with their input to help our decision-making. This cause severe delays in the decision-making process, which in the long run is very negative for the credibility of the *Bulletin*. Some do accept and when reminded, they provide us with very poor reviews that do not, in my view, add much value to the production of knowledge.

There is one disturbing trend, in my experience, that I have noted. These three groups presented above are mainly composed of researchers based in South Africa. I have thus often circumvented this problem by relying more on researchers based beyond the southern African region, and more so,

those based outside the African continent. I have often gone beyond Southern Africa because our 'market' for peer reviewers within our sub-region is limited. This is more of a concern with particular manuscripts (except for manuscripts focusing on Iron Age and heritage management).

My experience has often be more positive when I approach scholars beyond the African continent. This is not to say I have never been rejected nor experienced delays for one reason or the other. While approaching scholars beyond the African continent is a possible alternative to the ongoing challenges presented above, it is not a helpful solution in a long term, nor is it politically correct. I highlight two reasons for this. First, some scholars we are approaching might be experienced in the fields covered by the particular manuscripts, but they may not have adequate exposure to southern African archaeology. As a result, they sometimes do not feel comfortable with taking the peer review process unless their limitations can be noted and accepted. Second, there have been a lot of calls for the decolonisation of the production of knowledge. Such discussions are also made in the context of the power dynamics between the north and the south. If we are serious as the archaeological community to engage in meaningful discussions on issues of decoloniality, then what does it mean if we from the south fail to actively participate in knowledge production within our own geographical areas? Who are we going to continue blaming for ongoing challenges in the production of archaeological knowledge?

Another potential alternative to this unfortunate threat could be approaching younger scholars to assist with the reviews. I have made use of this option because besides it being a helpful approach to the peer review dilemma, I consider it to be a good training opportunity for these emerging scholars. While this is ideal, it is more important in my view to balance their reviews with those from experienced scholars.

As indicated earlier, the main challenge with either no responses, extensive delays in the peer review process, or the poor reviews we get is that it negatively affects the production timelines and quality of work published. By giving poor reviews after being chased around way past the deadline, are we being honest in our reading of the submitted manuscripts? Are we promoting integrity? Where is fairness in this regard?

This challenge with the peer review process is not good for anyone involved, be it the authors who become frustrated with the delays or the Editorial Team who are at the receiving end. This is a significant threat that should hopefully not be with us for much longer. What I find fascinating though is that some of our peers do expect that their manuscripts must be reviewed and that should happen within timeframes best suited to them. This is unfair in my view. Authors must also treat us with respect when making the necessary enquiries, appreciating the nature of the beast we are faced with. Furthermore, I appeal to our authors to have the patience required when one publishes. Our delays, while not appreciated, are not vastly different from other publishing forums around the world, where the turnaround time for publishing an article is about one year. Predatory journals (see Beall 2017) are flourishing because authors are looking for a quicker publishing timeline.

Our delays are not only limited to the review of manuscripts. We have our colleagues who accept our invitations to review new books. Yet, we wait for long periods and end up not getting such book reviews. Yet, books are with them. Because of the failure to receive such book reviews, we fail to deliver on the expectations from publishers who offer us these books for free with the aim of using reviewers for marketing purposes.

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