
Reasons to decline an invitation to peer review during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak - Are there implications for journal policy?

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With COVID-19 reaching Europe in late January 2020 (Spiteri et al., 2020) and turning into a full-blown pandemic with 271,364 confirmed cases¹ as of March 21, 2020, virtually all European countries have decided to take public health measures of varying degrees. Among these measures, academics are significantly affected by travel restrictions and shuttering education institutions. Due to travel restrictions, numerous international conferences have been cancelled or postponed. In severely affected countries like France, Spain and Italy, people are banned from leaving home except to buy essential supplies, medicines, or for work. Numerous EU countries, as well as the U.S. and the U.K., have encouraged citizens to stop unnecessary travel and non-essential contact with other people. With the country-wide closures of schools and universities affecting all EU member states in various degrees, higher education institutions had to reorganise the spring semester with faculty members providing courses online from their home.

Lack of time - still a valid ground for turning down requests to review?

Despite all hardship suffered in general by every citizen due to COVID-19, at first sight it may appear that academics are not as affected as other segments of society. One could even imagine that the situation actually may have a positive impact on their availability to review, reasoning that time saved by state- and institutionally-supported social distancing and university closures create more free time for academics. Also, because certain types of academic work conducted under normal circumstances are temporarily unavailable or pose too much risk, peer review as academic activity could take greater focus on the priority list of a restructured personal academic schedule.

Working from home and teaching online courses could be a real time-saver for faculty members. Perhaps the most obvious of those is saving on commuting time. A Eurostat (2020) survey using 2015 data suggested that one-way commuting time averages 42 minutes in the EU-28 countries and 53 minutes in the UK. Working from home has effectively decreased this to zero. Moreover, academics often faces even longer commutes from one city to another because of the specificities of the academic job market, so the time saved on commuting could be even higher. Widely discussed as part of the “adjunct crisis” problem, early career academics working as temporary lecturers (hired on a fixed, short term contract) commute significantly

¹ <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/geographical-distribution-2019-ncov-cases>

more. Academics are lucky to find a local position and they often teach in multiple institutions and cannot afford to move to a new place on fixed-term contracts. It is also not uncommon for tenure track professors to give lectures in institutions other than their main affiliation. But most importantly, centrally co-ordinated allocation of teaching times and availability of teaching spaces seriously hinders the chances of optimizing commute time with an economical teaching schedule. Rarely being able to compress all teaching hours in one day, most lecturers give courses at least two or three days per week. Furthermore, in Western Europe full-time faculty members are normally responsible for two to three courses a semester, while in Eastern Europe this would be considered extremely light.

Depending on the academic position, teaching load, central timetabling and the number of affiliated institutions, academics can gain several hours per week from university closures and transitioning to online courses. However, because this is not a natural transition, i.e. forced by the public health measures following the COVID-19 outbreak, there are other, indirect influences on the amount of time saved. In the EU-28, university closures preceded primary and secondary school closures. This leaves working parents with the task of arranging care for their children while they are still responsible for work; or if they have transited to working from home, finding a way to care for their children themselves while remaining productive and professional. Social distancing measures also require reorganising a whole range of ordinary activities, and with the whole epidemic situation negatively affecting psychological well-being, academics may save time with online courses, but may not be able to reuse it for professional goals and have to spend it for solving newly-raised non-work related problems. Therefore, it is uncertain how their objective and subjective availability for review is altered during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how journal policy should take this new situation into account when looking for external peer reviewers.

Reasons why peers invited by journals decline to review is an important, but relatively under-researched topic. Perhaps the main reason for this is the relative difficulty of conducting such research, as the required data is only accessible for journal editors and publishers. Key studies on this problem are limited to journals of one publishing group (Title and Schroter, 2007) or one individual journal (Willis, 2016; Domínguez-Berjón et al., 2018) and its authors are typically associated with the publisher or members of the editorial board of the journal investigated. Conflicts of interests between different journals and publishers of the same field can be the reason why more robust, comparative studies are less likely to be conducted. Existing results are also focused on STEM fields while not gathering much interest and attention in the social sciences, even though the functions and methods of academic publishing are essentially the same in natural and social science fields.

Indisputably, the backbone of any scientific journal's quality control mechanism is external peer evaluation. Depending on the journal's editorial policy and the number of revision rounds asked, a typical manuscript consume at least two, but often 3 to 6 external reviewers before its final acceptance (or rejection). There seems to be little debate in the published literature on the fact that peer reviewers add significant value to the products of commercial and non-profit academic publishers. The same goes to the authors, whose academic capital is enriched by peer-reviewed publication and its future potential to attract citations and networking opportunities with other researchers of the field. Reviewer work is undercompensated, both in the financial and the symbolic sense, but this does not have a major impact on the system since intrinsic and prosocial motivations are much more relevant than extrinsic ones for peers accepting to review (Zaharie and Seeber 2018). When they decline to review, lack of time is the most common reason (Title and Schroter 2007, Willis 2016, Domínguez-Berjón et. al 2018), one which is normally plausible, general and neutral, leaving no room for further questions. However, lack of time is a valid reason in this context only because it is meant as referring not to conflict with any other activity, but with professional workloads: Any academic who publishes peer-

reviewed research has already profited from multiple researchers' peer evaluation, making reviewing for journals part of an informal professional transaction and good practice at the community level rather than an ethically-neutral individual choice.

By transitioning to online courses and suspending or restructuring many other professional activities during the COVID-19 outbreak, being swamped with other work-related tasks is less likely to be a valid ground for turning down requests to review. Lack of time as an explanation for refusing to review is still expected to be given to invitations, but we hypothesize that this will more likely refer to a non-work-related situation compared to pre-outbreak responses.

Methods

In examining reviewers' willingness to accept invitations to review, this short study compares reviewers' negative responses to invitations to review. We looked at the journal KOME – An International Journal of Pure Communication Inquiry (ISSN 2063-7330), based in Hungary. The journal uses a dedicated email address for peer review management and sends reviewer invitations to members of the Hungarian Communication Studies Association, members of the editorial board, experts from the Editors' professional network as well as cold-calling experts in email based on their publishing profile in SCOPUS and Web of Science. For this study, we collected refusal replies between the 1st February and 31st March, 2018, 2019 and 2020 to invitations to review original (research) papers submitted to KOME. Only initial replies were considered, i.e. replies were not included if a peer accepted the request but declined later. Data were collected and used with the approval of the journal owners, on the understanding that reviewer names and other personally identifiable information were not revealed. Reasons for refusal were extracted from the replies and categorized using a mixed-method approach: The three main categories for refusal reasons ("work-related reasons", "non-work related reasons" and "not specifiable") were pre-determined by the author, while subcategories emerged from the data during the analysis. If a potential reviewer provided multiple reasons coded to the same subcategory in their answer, it gets counted (merged) as one reason, but if they provided reasons belonging to different categories, they get counted once for each separate subcategory.

Results

A total of 116 reasons from 94 refusal responses were collected. After merging multiple reasons provided in the same response belonging to one subcategory, a total of 102 units were drawn out for analysis; 34 from 2018, 41 from 2019 and 27 from 2020.

Table 1: Refusal reasons for peer review request at KOME, 01 February – March 31

	WRR- Lack of time	WRR- Lack of expertise	WRR- Unavailable	WRR- Conflict of interest	NWRR- Lack of time	Not specified	Total
2018	19 (55.9%)	3 (8.8%)	2 (5.9%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.9%)	9 (26.5%)	34 (100%)
2019	24 (58.5%)	3 (7.3%)	2 (4.9%)	1 (2.4%)	1 (2.4%)	10 (24.4%)	41 (100%)
2020	17 (63%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (3.7%)	0 (0.0%)	7 (25.9%)	2 (7.4%)	27 (100%)

WRR-Lack of time: This subcategory encompasses all reasoning pointing to conflicts with other professional obligations or academic activity. Typical items belonging to this category are those referring to being swamped with review obligations or being busy finishing a book/paper/evaluation etc.

WRR-Lack of expertise: Items in answers where the potential reviewer excused themselves mentioning not having the specific expertise required to critically evaluating the manuscript

WRR-Unavailable: Items coded in this specific subcategory referred to mentions of being retired or on parental/research leave

WRR-Conflict of interest: With only one item, this subcategory is for a declined request where in spite of a complete anonymisation the potential reviewer was aware of the author's identity

NWRR-Lack of time: All items referring to personal-level reasons, events unrelated to work or status changes were coded into this category, including medical circumstances, parenting hardships and the direct and indirect effects of anti-pandemic measures in 2020.

Not specified: These reasons were too general or insubstantial to indicate whether they were work related or-non work related. "I am unable to review this paper at this time", "I am sorry I cannot take this on" or "I don't have time to do it" are some examples that were coded into this category.

Work-related reasons were the most often used by those who declined to review (70.6% of all reasons provided in 2018, 73.1% in 2019 and 66.7% in 2020) which is consistent with previous studies. In each investigated period, the most common reason was lack of time due to conflicts with professional activities (55.9%, 58.5% and 63% respectively). It was found that the journal received significantly less general, unspecified dismissals in February and March 2020, compared to the similar time period in 2019 and 2018. In those 2 years, approximately one of every four reviewers did not specify a reason for rejecting the review request, however, in 2020 only two potential reviewers declined the invitation without a specific reason. While the ratio of not providing specifics for the refusal decreased significantly in February and March 2020. At the same time, non-work-related reasons for not having time to review became approximately ten times more frequent compared to 2019 and 2018. In 2020, they accounted for 25.9% of all dismissal reasons provided by the peers invited (previously 2.9% in 2018 and 2.4% in 2019). All of these non-work-related reasons were connected directly or indirectly to

the coronavirus outbreak. Peers specified increased parenting workload connected with home schooling and supervising children at home, which require extra time and energy, as well as the increasing difficulties of everyday life introduced by lockdowns and social distancing. Effects of the outbreak also crept into work-related reasons, where in three instances there were references to lack of time due to reorganising teaching activities due to the coronavirus situation. This means that during this 2-months period in 2020, 37% of all reasons provided for not reviewing for the journal were connected to the social effects of the COVID-19 outbreak.

Mini-discussion and implications for editorial policy

Finding appropriate reviewers poses a challenge to many journals, especially for those without a strong international reputation or a solid commercial academic publisher. Relatively new, online and open access journals coming outside of the native English-speaking regions of the Global North often have to face rejection when reaching out to reviewers, even without a global pandemic spreading through society. Analysing reasons for rejection during normal and turbulent times allow journal editors to strengthen their peer review process by finding new ways of approaching reviewers as well as understanding how the coronavirus outbreak and anti-pandemic measures affect potential reviewers' willingness to cooperate with journals.

This mini-study has a number of limitations, most obvious is the limited sample size gathered from one journal with a specific profile, and the regional characteristics of the journal's reviewer pool; as the journal in question ask academics mainly from Global North countries to review, but without relying heavily on specific countries or institutions. This makes the results ungeneralizable to a wider group of journals. More research is needed to understand how journal reviewers are affected in Global South institutions. It would be interesting to understand if results vary at the country level. Methods used for analysis could profit from qualitative interviews uncover the reasoning behind the excuse of not having enough time to review. For example, this could mean that the journal is simply not prestigious enough to merit one's time, but the invited does not want to offend the editors and is looking for an easier and more neutral refusal reason. Or, in the current situation, it is possible that this answer is used to cover for a larger problem like decreased productivity from psychological trauma from the pandemic. As the pandemic is still underway, a more complete picture of how its social consequences affect reviewer availability could also be gained by repeating the study after the situation passes. Until then, these preliminary results show us that the coronavirus outbreak is responsible for one of every three reasons offered to KOME when an external peer evaluation request was declined. The situation also seems to motivate peers to specify why they are refusing to review, which occurred less frequently during "normal" times.

Implications of these experiences to journal policy resulted in an editorial decision that, effective April 1, 2020, KOME will not ask external experts to review from countries where schools and universities are closed, until the coronavirus situation is under control and these institutions reopen. Unfortunate as is, the majority of countries with high research output and high-ranking academic institutions are affected by these measures, and the case is similar with most of the editorial staff's home institutions. Therefore, it is expected that the peer review process will last longer for new submissions as well as for manuscripts passing preliminary editorial evaluation and scheduled for peer review, but still without designated peers. Before COVID-19, an average peer review cycle at KOME lasted anywhere between 2 to 4 months; we estimate that it will be at least one but possibly two months longer, on average, until the situation normalises. Currently we do not have exact information on the impact of the coronavirus outbreak on the functioning of other journals of the field or from the region. A clear public communication of key changes, or the lack thereof, towards the authors and the

general audience would be recommended from an ethics standpoint, not to mention it could equally offer helpful data for coronavirus impact research.

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