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'The era of norms is dead,' so should peer reviewers be paid?

By Fiona McIntyre

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Rising pressures on the scholarly publishing system have sparked controversial calls to compensate reviewers

Do researchers have a duty to conduct peer review as part of the research process? Or should they be paid extra for doing reviews?

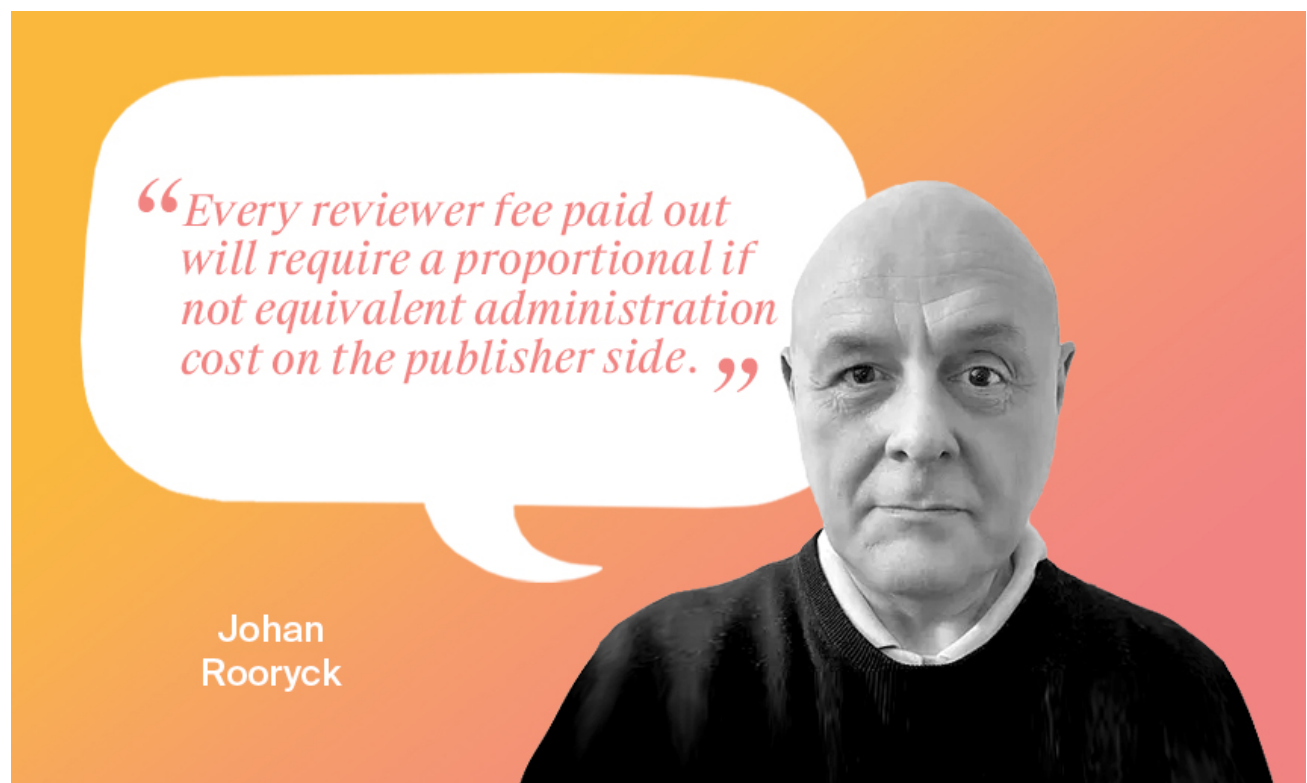
Jonas Kunst, a professor of communication at the BI Norwegian Business School, professor of cultural and community psychology at the University of Oslo and founder of a journal that pays peer reviewers, is positive about payments. Last month, he told Research Professional News that publishers should consider paying peer reviewers because it is an “economically viable” way to address the “structural problem” of the current system.

The struggles with peer review are well known: because academics are generally overworked, fewer of them are agreeing to do reviews amid an ever-increasing number of paper submissions, leaving the system hopelessly overstretched. In April, RPN reported that both submissions and publications rose at three of the ‘big five’ publishers—Elsevier, Springer Nature and Wiley—in 2025.

Kunst set up the UK-based journal *Advances.in/psychology* in 2022 in part to test how paying for peer review would work in practice. The journal pays \$100 per full review that meets its quality standards, with the money coming from article-processing charges (APCs) paid by authors.

He said the journal has “disproved” the theory that paying for peer review is too expensive, and he noted that *Advances.in/psychology* has an average turnaround of just 4.8 months from submission of paper to acceptance. So far, 500 reviewers have signed up.

However, not everyone agrees that paying reviewers is the right path to take.



Risks for researchers

Johan Rooryck, a former executive director of the Coalition S open access group, told RPN that paying reviewers is “a very bad idea”.

He argued that paying peer reviewers “further monetises...the publishing system into distinct, payable, commoditised units”, whereas peer review should be “a collaborative moment, not a transactional one”.

Rooryck also warned that payment “practically invites abusive practices in the form of ‘reviewing farms’ that will use thinly disguised artificial intelligence-generated reviews for money”, with particular risks for researchers in low- and middle-income countries.

What’s more, paying for peer review is simply “administratively impractical”, he said.

“Every reviewer fee paid out will require a proportional if not equivalent administration cost on the publisher side,” he argued. “Finally, after taxes are paid, I doubt the reviewer would have enough left for dinner for two at a local restaurant. Some incentive.”

But others argue that paying reviewers is a simple way to boost the number of reviewers and shorten the time it takes to secure sufficient reviews while simultaneously maintaining—or improving—their quality.

Daniel Gorelick, an associate professor at Baylor College of Medicine in the US and editor-in-chief of the UK-based journal *Biology Open*, explained that the journal began paying reviewers in July 2024 as an experiment to test whether the time taken for peer review could be slashed without compromising on quality.

Reviewers were compensated for their time at £220 per manuscript, and in return they committed to completing their reviews within four business days. For the pilot study, the costs were covered by the publisher, but Gorelick said APCs have since risen slightly to help fund the payments.

The results of the pilot study, which ran until December 2024, revealed a significant reduction in total turnaround times for manuscripts—from around 38 business days to 4.6 business days. Despite this change, there was no reduction in quality of reviews, as measured by assessments from academic editors—and anecdotally there was a slight improvement. The initiative, known as fast and fair peer review, is now being expanded to more subject areas and editors.

‘Exploitation’ of expertise

Speaking in a personal capacity, Gorelick told RPN that paying reviewers has the potential to improve the quality of reviews.

“Providing a good incentive to do high-quality peer review can actually improve peer review,” he said, adding that a financial incentive offers “quality control, because now I’m paying you to do a job, so if you don’t do a good job I care very deeply”.

Gorelick disputes the idea that paying reviewers turns peer review from a long-established norm into a transaction, arguing that “there’s already a transactional element” involved.

“You pay either a subscription fee through your library or you directly pay an APC to publish in an open access journal,” he said. “The era of norms is dead. We are entirely in a transactional world. Even society journals published by non-profit societies that are giving back...to the community are charging publication costs.”

Gorelick himself no longer reviews for large, for-profit publishers for free. “Why would I waste my time on this if I’m not being paid?” he said. “To me, this is a form of exploitation. It’s not clear to me why scientists are so willing to be exploited in this way.”

But Rooryck stressed that “researchers are already paid” to conduct peer review as they are paid for doing their research, and reviewing others’ work “is part of research”.

“Doing reviews should be better rewarded and recognised within the workload of researchers, not incentivised by separate payments,” he said.



Recognition economy

Stephen Pinfield, a senior research fellow at the Research on Research Institute and a professor of information services management at the University of Sheffield, both in the UK, agreed that peer review needs to be incentivised without resorting to payment.

Pinfield believes “there ought to be far more visibility about peer review activity”, with it seen as “a crucial part of your service...as an academic”.

He described academia as “a recognition economy” in which greater recognition indirectly leads to, for example, more promotion opportunities. Recognition or reputation is won through a researcher’s contribution to their subject area, which is usually assessed through their publications.

“But if you want to encourage engagement within peer review, then acknowledging it’s a recognition economy and putting in place incentives that work within a recognition economy seems to me to be a better way of doing it than creating a financial incentive that could have unintended consequences and...may be difficult for the system to afford,” he said.

Pinfield added that the MetaROR platform for research in the field of metascience, published by the Research on Research Institute, uses a publish-review-curate approach, which offers open review. Under this PRC model, authors submit articles that have been published on a preprint server to MetaROR, which then organises open peer review. An editorial assessment follows, and readers access the article along with the assessment and review reports.

Pinfield explained that **the PRC model** is specifically designed “to incentivise peer reviewers by making their peer reviews public” so that their efforts can be recognised.

Sticking plaster solution

Pinfield also identified another problem with paying reviewers: that APCs are becoming more unpopular due to the profit margins of big commercial publishers.

“If your solution to recruiting peer reviewers relies on that system, which is increasingly losing support in the whole sector, it seems to me that it’s based on shaky foundations,” he said.

Ultimately, paying for peer review is akin to tweaking a system that fundamentally needs an overhaul, he argued. “It’s very much a sticking plaster...over a system that needs more radical reform,” Pinfield said.

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