Experiment in open peer review for books suggests increased fairness and transparency in feedback process.

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Over two-thirds of Palgrave Macmillan authors thought academic publishers should be experimenting with alternative peer review methods. Hazel Newton*, the Head of Digital Publishing at Palgrave Macmillan describes their current peer review pilot investigating how open feedback functions in monograph publishing, from the initial proposal to the finished result. Reflections from* Katherine Cartmell *and* Shepard Masocha*, a reviewer and an author in this pilot, are also provided below.*
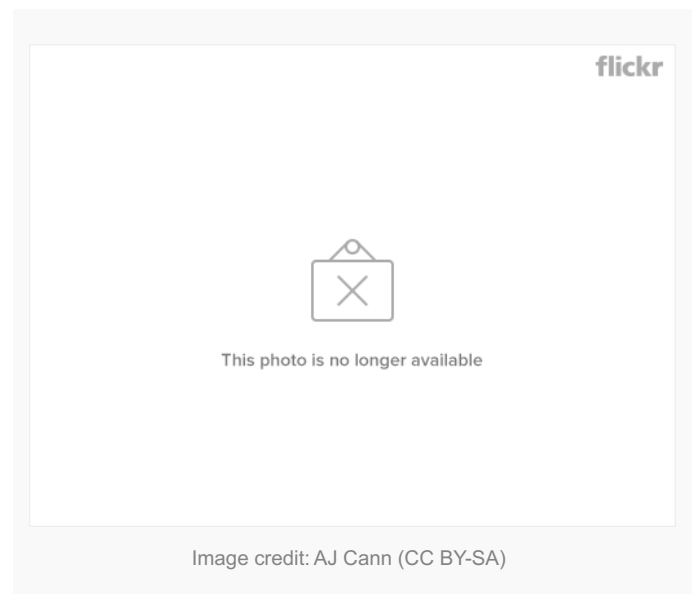
Peer review is at the heart of academic publishing, a stamp of quality for scholarly research. But while publishing has evolved and adapted to the digital landscape, peer review remains stuck in its traditional format. Last month, in reaction to feedback from our authors and in the spirit of exploring opportunities to improve the peer review process, we launched an open review trial for academic books. We've placed selected book proposals and associated sample chapters on a website and are inviting comment from anyone who feels they can contribute to their development – so they needn't necessarily be an academic, and nor do they have to work in the same research areas or even discipline. The trial runs until March 7.

Experimentation with open peer review began first in journals as digital publishing took hold, ten and fifteen years ago. Open review is now an established part of the evaluation process for several prominent journals (see BMC-series medical journals and the BMJ) and has been growing in popularity with the advent of open access publishing. With academic debate increasingly taking place online, now seems the right time to experiment with open review for books.

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We're also responding to the research community: over two-thirds of the authors we surveyed last year told us they thought publishers should be experimenting with alternative peer review methods. Responses indicated that rather than this interest being driven by dissatisfaction with existing peer review methods, it was inspired by curiosity in what new approaches might offer. We want to provoke debate about the pros and cons of open review, and are keen to hear academics' views. At the end of the trial we'll report on participants' experiences, and on the feedback we've received.

There are typically two stages to monograph peer review: the proposal and sample chapters are sent for review before a book is contracted, and on completion the full manuscript is usually reviewed before being approved for publication. There have only been a tiny number of experiments in open review for scholarly books, and these have explored open commenting on full manuscripts. We thought it was worth exploring whether there might be value to offering it earlier in the writing process.

There are many forms of open peer review, from simply making reviewers' names public, to publishing traditional review reports alongside works. We chose to do both of these, while also using an interactive version which enables authors to respond to commentators, because our authors told us they wanted peer review to have more emphasis

on developing work rather than simply gatekeeping. Interactive open peer review has some obvious benefits, including the possibility of feedback from a wider range of perspectives, maybe even from expert practitioners and policy-makers; the chance for open discussion between authors and reviewers; and a reduced chance of bias since reviewers' identities and comments are public.

So far, we've been really pleased with the reaction and buzz around the project. We've had comments from those experienced, and also less experienced, with the peer review process. Some authors have even asked for their works to be reviewed openly in future! One criticism we have received is that there is too little incentive for peer reviewers. We're interested to hear whether people concur with this criticism, along with any ideas they may have to overcome this. For example, one approach employed by some journals, such as those published by Frontiers, is to name reviewers on the final version of the article, so that their contribution is recognised.

Author and Reviewer perspectives on the Palgrave Macmillan Open Peer Review Trial

Shepard Masocha, School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research, University of Kent.

I was recently invited to take part in the Palgrave Macmillan trial of open peer reviewing of book proposals by my editor. The title of my proposed book is *Asylum Seekers, Social Work and Racism.* I plan to publish it as a Palgrave Pivot, digital-first project which would be no more than 50,000 words.

The proposed book analyses social work professionals' discourses on asylum seeking; there are a very limited number of books available to both students and practitioners that have been published on the topic asylum seekers in social work, despite its growing importance as an area of practice. This is my first book contract with a publisher. I agreed to participate in the open peer review process because I am very keen to receive feedback from peer reviewers whilst I am still in the process of writing the book.

Since the beginning of this trial period, I have started to receive valuable feedback. There are issues that have also been pointed out by reviewers, which I had not thought of. For instance, I am now beginning to think of ways that I can integrate case studies within the chapters as a way of illustrating how the theoretical ideas can be translated to social work practice. I had not initially considered the use of case studies for this project, as it is a monograph reporting on a specific research project, but I do think that students will find the use of case studies very helpful. I'm also working with a colleague on a separate textbook project, which will use a lot of case studies to demonstrate how these theoretical ideas can be applied to practice. I've replied to the initial comments, and it will be interesting to see if this results in an ongoing conversation. It will also be interesting to see what my editor thinks!

Katherine Cartmell, Senior Lecturer in the Psychology of Childhood, Liverpool John Moores University

I think that open peer review is an innovative way to engage with potential readers and experts within a given field, and can result in the publication of a much better final output. I probably would do this again in future, given the opportunity, because I think it is important to get the perspectives of others who are not too close to the project.

Having been a reviewed author and a reviewer during the 'normal' peer review process, Palgrave's experiment caught my eye and interest for a number of reasons. One of those reasons was the sheer desperation that I have felt as an academic author with the standard peer review process. Receiving a rejection is always disappointing (and to some heart breaking!), but there is nothing more de-motivating then when that rejection is based on clear theoretical or epistemological clashes arising from the pairing of reviewer and author. Who should be stipulating which theoretical framework should be employed? The established and experienced reviewer or the early career researcher who is trying to get the academic community to see things through a different

lens? On a similar note, as a reviewer I find the blind peer review process limits the possibilities of team working. For example, when it is clear that there are methodological issues I make these as clear as possible within my reports. However, it would work so much better if I could put my name to my comments and offer to expand on these issues, should the author wish to via further correspondence. Isn't this why we get involved in peer reviewing? To help and assist others?

As researchers, we are constantly trying to remain biased-free and as objective as possible. Yet, for the last century we have allowed our peer review process to be based upon the comments and ideas of around three people! Three very qualified people I agree, but that does not and has not stopped research being rejected based purely on competitive based decisions (Benos et al., 2007). Back in 1990, McNutt et al. first indicated that reviews contained far more constructive comments when the reviewer identified themselves versus when it was a blind review system.

The possibility of gaining increased accountability, fairness, and transparency far outweigh, for me, the panoptic system we currently have now.

If you're interested in open peer review, go to www.palgraveopenreview.com and take part in the debate – we welcome comments on the concept of open peer review as well as on the individual books taking part.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our Comments Policy if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

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