

Twitter Spaces transcript – tips on becoming a peer reviewer

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Mark:

Hello, everybody. Welcome to today's Twitter Spaces chat. Thank you very much for joining us. I can see that people are beginning to filter in, so as they do that, I'll just give a quick introduction to our session.

My name is Mark, and I work in the Author Services team at Taylor & Francis, and we produce and share a huge range of resources and services to help you publish the outputs of your research and to help you to develop your research career.

And we're running this session today as part of our activities for Peer Review Week. The theme and our focus particularly is on the topic of how you can become a peer reviewer yourself. So, we really want this to be a very practical session. Lots of good, tried, and tested tips that you can put into practice.

So, thank you for joining us. And so, I'm delighted to say that our expert today is Dr. Diana Marshall. Di is head of reviewer programs at Taylor & Francis and she has a background in plant biology, gaining her Ph.D. at Cambridge University.

And today she heads up a team who help editors of journals to find the right reviewers for their journals, and they also train researchers to be excellent reviewers. So, she really is the ideal person to have with us today.

So Di, thank you very much for joining us.

Di:

Very happy to be here.

Mark:

Great. I'll just do a quick bit of housekeeping before we properly kick off. Just to say that we're going to have some time at the end to answer your questions.

So, if you're listening in, do please send us a DM to the @tandfonline Twitter handle if you've got any questions that you'd like me to put to Di on the issue of becoming a peer reviewer. And also, to say at any point, I think if you want to see captions, you can click the show captions button and that will allow you to see live captions.

Right, let's get started, shall we? So, as I say, we're going to go into some practical tips very soon, but Di, perhaps to kick us off, could you help to set the scene for us?

I was wondering whether maybe for those of us with less experience of peer review, could you tell us what a peer reviewer does or what is the role of a peer reviewer?

Di:

Yes, sure. So, a peer reviewer is someone who has expertise in a particular area of knowledge or research, and who offers that expertise in assessing a piece of work, usually before it gets published or sometimes after publication. And peer reviewers are usually selected and invited by editors of journals from researchers who are active within a particular field, and the editor will ask that reviewer to assess a particular piece of work.

Peer reviewers... their role is to look at the technical accuracy, the validity of the methods or the argument, the clarity of the work, the reproducibility, whether there's any data that needs detailed assessment, and whether the conclusions are appropriate for what the author has laid out in their work.

There's lots of different aspects that the peer reviewer might assess, and it will vary a bit by subject area and the type of article that you're looking at - what you're going to be considering most important within all of that.

And this assessment from the peer reviewer then helps the editor to make their decision on whether the article should be published or not. And also, hopefully, helps the author to improve their work.

Mark:

Great. Thank you. That was it was a brilliant, brief introduction there, so it sounds like quite a responsible role being a peer reviewer, and quite time consuming if you do it properly. So, what are the benefits of being a peer reviewer?

Di:

Yeah, it is a responsible role, and it's a really important role as well. Because that process of peer review and assessment is really important to ensure that research that's published can be trusted, and so that those reading that research know that they can build their next bit of work - their future work - on what is out there in the literature. And actually, it's that importance of peer review, which I think is why many researchers get involved at all.

Because when we asked our reviewers why they get involved, they say... well, they want to be part of ensuring that quality in the published literature in their field. There are also some other benefits, though, including that opportunity to read and engage with the most recent research in the field.

Again, when you ask a reviewer why you agreed to review this particular article, usually the most selected answer is, well, it looked interesting. Like something I was going to enjoy getting involved with and reading and looking through. In terms of other benefits, though, it's also a great way to build connections with editors who might be senior researchers.

And that process of being constructively critical of other people's work can help to improve your own approach to your research and writing your next paper. And there might be some other more

direct benefits as well, like credit for reviewing, or free access to content that journals might offer as a bit of a thank you for the time taken for peer review.

Mark:

Great, so benefits to you as a reviewer, benefits to the field and also an opportunity to get a sneak peek of what's coming sort of the latest research. That sounds great.

So, lots of good reasons to be a reviewer, but I think I think it's fair to say that becoming a reviewer isn't always easy. I've heard people say that it can sometimes seem like a bit like a secret society that isn't keen on new members getting in. I don't think that's true, but I bet it can feel like that for some.

So, Di, I asked you in advance whether you could come today with five top tips for becoming a reviewer. Five things that people could do that would really make a difference. So, I wonder whether now perhaps you could share with us those five tips?

Di:

Yes, absolutely. I did think about this in advance as requested. So, I think, first of all, make sure that any online profiles that you have are up to date because when it comes down to it... it isn't that secret society, but editors do need to know who you are and to find out about you as a potential reviewer, and know that you have expertise in a field, so that they know that they can invite you to review and what kinds of articles that they should invite you to review. And this really ties in with the theme of Peer Review Week, which is identity in peer review.

Because establishing your identity as a researcher in the field, as someone interested in reviewing and making sure that people can find that is really important if you want to start getting involved in peer review. So make sure, first of all, that if the editor was to search for you, that any online presence you have is clear about your expertise and has up to date contact details, particularly an up-to-date email address. So that's one - make sure your online profiles are up to date.

A second tip is that you can use some online tools to generate a profile. Particularly, I would recommend setting up a profile on Publons. Publons is a site which allows you, as a reviewer, to collate verified information about the reviews that you have completed. It doesn't share any confidential details. It doesn't say you reviewed this article or that article, but it says which journals you are reviewing for and there are systems within journals, whereby the journal can confirm "yes, this person completed a review for this journal". And what that does is enables you to showcase the work that you're doing as a reviewer, and some editors - and even some A.I. tools that search for potential reviewers - do use Publons as a source of information about people who are active reviewers and who are sharing that they want to be active reviewers for particular subject areas.

So online profiles and, second, create a profile on Publons. That's a really useful thing to do.

A third option, which is a little bit of a different approach, is you could explore the opportunity to co-review with a more experienced colleague.

Now, many people - particularly who are earlier in their careers - might have colleagues within their department, within their research institute, who are very experienced and who get a lot of requests to review. And it is okay, usually, to co-review with someone - provided that you ask the journal first.

So, if they receive an invitation to review then, they can go back to the journal and say, "I would really like to invite my colleague X to review this article with me". And if the journal says it's okay, then they can share those details and do that, co-reviewing alongside you. The journal will want to know in advance because peer review is a confidential process, and they want to know if it's going to get shared at all. And it will also be important so the journal knows that you should get some credit for this review as well.

So, you might want to ask around if there's anyone in your institution who might be willing to work with you on some reviews. So that's another bit more of a kind of personal approach within your institute, you might want to try out.

Another bit more of a direct personal approach is; it is also absolutely fine to contact an editor or a journal and to volunteer yourself as a reviewer. So editors are probably looking for people who they want to get involved in peer reviewing. So it's not a bad idea to email that editor and ask if you can become a reviewer.

If you do make contact with an editor in this way, then make sure you're clear about what your expertise is so that they know what they might want to invite you to review for. They need to match up your expertise with those articles, so be really clear on what you can assess.

And also, again, make sure you share some up-to-date contact details. And just an extra word on this - don't be put off if they don't ask you to review something immediately, because they will be selecting reviewers suitable for each article that comes in. And it might just be that they don't have something in your area straight away. So, don't worry if you don't hear back immediately, but editors are often quite happy to get sort of people in contact saying that they would be willing to review.

So, the four of these five tips so far, make sure online profiles of up to date. Get a profile on Publons because that can help to raise your standing as a potential reviewer. Talk to an experienced colleague to see if they could co-review some things with you. And contact the editors of journals you're interested in reviewing for to volunteer.

And then finally, my last of my top five tips is you can always get some training in how to be a peer reviewer. There are loads of training courses out there which can help you to build your confidence in how to be a peer reviewer, either improving your skills or introducing you to that process. If you've not been a reviewer before. And you might think that it's all completely obvious what you should do as a peer reviewer. Why do I need training? But it can be really helpful to give you that different perspective and make new connections. Again, maybe with journals or publishers that you're doing that training with.

I'd, of course, recommend our review reviewer training, Excellence Peer Review: Taylor Francis Reviewer Training Network, as a good place to start for this. Yeah, so that's my top five tips.

Mark:

Fantastic. Thank you very much. I'll just go through those again so that people have got them. So they were:

Make sure that your online profiles are up to date so when people are searching for experts in a field that you come up. Create a profile on Publons. Think about co-reviewing with a more experienced colleague. Volunteer yourself as a reviewer - contact the editors to do that. And finally get some

training on how to be a peer reviewer. And I guess that's the case that even if you've done some peer reviewing already, that can be helpful.

So, Di picking up on that last one, I wonder whether you could tell us a little bit more about the reviewer training that Taylor & Francis offers. What's included in that training, and how can people sign up if they're interested in it?

Di:

Yeah, sure. So our training is under the title, as I said "Excellence in Peer Review: Taylor & Francis Reviewer Training Network." I'm sure that we'll be tweeting some links to this. But also, if you searched in Google, you would find it as well.

We offer a few different resources as part of this. Primarily, we are running webinars which run on a regular basis, and it's the same content at each webinar. So, don't worry about "Oh, I've got to lots." It's just one webinar. We've got a version that's sort of a bit more geared towards if you're in science, technology or medicine fields. And we've got a version that's more geared towards if you're in a humanities, social sciences or arts fields.

Because, as I said, the things you might want to think about as a reviewer can be a little bit different, depending on the subject area. And that webinar is free. It's free to sign up to. If you go to our pages, then you'll find a list of our upcoming events and you can just select the one that interests you and you can sign up there. And what we'll do in that webinar is it takes about an hour and a half and we'll take you through basically lots of essential things of thinking about being a peer reviewer. A bit of a look at the process... things to look out for when you receive an invitation to review. So, what you should think about before you even click agree, and in what cases you might want to say "actually, no, I'm not going to review that article." And then once you've clicked agree, the kind of things you might come across when you're being a peer reviewer, things you might need to look out for, how to deal with it if you find any ethical concerns when you're reviewing an article, structuring reports. Yeah, lots of practical hints and tips, and how to use example reports and things like that to help guide you through that process. And there is always time for Q&A during those sessions as well.

And we are also going to be adding some more video resources on those pages as well to give more information. Just little bite sized snippets. If you've not had the opportunity to review before to look into a few different bits of information.

Mark:

Great, thank you. Di is probably too modest to say this, but I've seen loads of great feedback from these sessions they've held previously, people saying that about the amount that they've learned, and how much they value those webinars. So do check them out.

Great. Thank you. Well, we've had loads of good, good practical tips already. We've got a little bit of time left for questions. So, if you're listening in and you've got some questions that you'd like to put to Di then you can direct message the @tandfonline handle and get those questions through to us; your questions on how to become a peer reviewer.

While they're coming in, Di, going back to your tips... I gave you the opportunity to share five. But I'm wondering now whether there were any that didn't quite make the cut, but would also be perhaps to be worth considering after those top five.

Anything else that people might be able to do to help their prospects of becoming a reviewer?

Di:

Yes, I think there's a few other things as well you can have think about. And I think one option is, when you're talking to your senior colleagues, if co reviewing seems like a bit too much and your senior or experienced colleagues don't have time to think about that and even don't have time to say yes to all the invitations to review - then many journals also give the option of somebody who's received an invitation to recommend somebody else, if they have to decline because they can't fit in the time, or whatever. So, you could also ask a senior colleague if they would consider recommending you directly to journals for some reviews, either on particular manuscripts that they think would be within your expertise, or just generally if they're an editorial board member of a journal or something. Then they might be able to talk to the editor-in-chief to recommend you. Because again, I think having that personal connection can be very helpful.

Other ways you can get involved is if you... sometimes publishers have ways that you can register with the journal or with the publisher itself as a peer reviewer. Again, trying to get that connection with editors is very helpful. But you can also do that via publishers. Another thing is just get publishing. You know that one of the really key things in academia is to get your name out there through the publications that you have as well. So, once you get those publications going again, it's much easier for people to find you as a potential reviewer.

Mark:

Great, so I guess you probably wouldn't publish just so that you could become a reviewer. But that's definitely one way of helping that, isn't it?

Yeah. OK, brilliant. Thank you. So, even more things to think about. I wonder whether we could pick up on that theme of identity that you mentioned. So that's the theme of this year's Peer Review Week. And I guess a number of people might feel that their identity makes it more of a challenge for them to become a reviewer. I guess, particularly perhaps early career researchers who might feel that there, as an ECR, it disqualifies him from being a reviewer.

Is there a role for early career researchers in review? And if so, any particular advice to them?

Di:

Yeah, well, I mean, I think there's an amazing role for early career researchers in peer review. And actually when I talk to editors and we talk about early career researchers, so many editors say early career researchers do a great job of being peer reviewers because they're generally very thorough. Because they are early in their career, they're generally very close to their topic. And so, they're really engaged and very up to date with what's going on. And early career researchers often put a lot of effort into peer review, so editors get really great reviews from early career researchers.

So, I would say early career researchers in general should feel very confident about their ability to act as a peer reviewer, and to get involved. And I think all of the tips that I shared so far. Try it, try those to start to get yourself known.

And actually, if you do sign up to our training, then one of the things that we do offer after the webinars is the opportunity to volunteer as a reviewer for relevant journals. So we do make that connection for you, between you and the editor and the journal to put that training into practice.

So particularly if you're an early career researcher and maybe your online profile doesn't feel as strong yet, maybe coming through the training could be a great way to make some of these connections.

Mark:

Great, thank you. So also along this sort of identity theme. I know that you say your training courses that you run are open to everyone. Any parts of the world. But I know that you also run courses specifically aimed to help researchers in regions that I guess you'd say they're underrepresented in the reviewer pool and underrepresented for some journals. So, I know that you often run events in China or South Asia, for example. So why is diversity of reviewers important?

Di:

Well, I don't know if you've got long enough to answer that question as fully as I might, but I'll give the short version.

I mean, essentially in terms of diversity in any endeavor, you don't want to just hear one or two voices. You want to be able to hear from a whole range of a community because research is happening globally, all over the world.

So, it makes it makes very little sense if the peer reviewers of that research are then concentrated in one part of the world. If there's a big focus on the U.S. or Western Europe, then we're not only missing a lot of voices, you have important things to say in the assessment of research, but also you're narrowing your pool of people who are getting involved in peer review - and that's not good for anybody. It means that voices aren't heard. It means that those people who are being invited to review are being invited again and again and again and getting overburdened.

And if you overburden reviewers, then actually peer review then takes longer. So, on many levels, having more diverse voices involved in peer review is really important. And that's also why some of our sessions are actually run in Chinese language as well - because we really want to reach out to all over the globe and make sure that researchers, where we're publishing research, are fully involved in all the different aspects of that process.

Mark:

Thank you. Yeah. I'm conscious we're going slightly off topic of sort of how to become a peer reviewer. But I think these are really important issues.

So, I guess the message is, you know, to be confident, to put yourself forward, to become a reviewer, even if you... if you're conscious that, you know, you're an early career researcher, or maybe you're in a region where it's harder to become a reviewer that the editors do want to hear your voices and do want your contributions to their journals – so, worth going for it.

And another question, actually, which is slightly off topic, but going on to sort of the scenario where you've been invited to review and I guess in some cases, maybe be waiting for a long time to get the opportunity to be invited to peer review. Are there any times which you should then turn down an invitation to review?

Di:

Yes. And actually, it's one of the things that we really bring out in the training, is that it's okay to say no, because sometimes, as you say, you've been waiting for ages for the editors to get in touch. And then, you know, if you say no, then is that going to make you look bad to the editor or make them not want to invite you to again and that's not the case.

The times when you might want to say no to an invitation are if you're concerned that the article you've been asked to review is outside your expertise. So maybe the editor hasn't quite got your subject area quite right, and you're looking at it and you're thinking "actually, I'm not sure I can say anything sensible about this paper". So in those cases, you might want to say no and either recommend someone else, or just update your keywords with the editors say, you know, "thank you so much for the invitation. I'm afraid I can't review this. I would review things in this area instead."

You might also say no if there was anything about the article that you thought meant that you couldn't be fair. So, if you thought you had a conflict of interest, if you know the names of the authors, if that's shared with you and the review invitation, it would depend on the review process, whether they are or not. But if you are sent their names and if you realize you've got any professional affiliation that overlaps with them, if you're at the same institution, or if you know them very well and you feel that you couldn't give a fair review, then that might... that would also be a good reason to say no. Or it might be that there's some kind of funding conflict, or something that might produce a conflict of interest, which means that your review might not be as independent as it should be.

So, in those cases, again, say no, tell the editor why, and then they'll know that they could invite you to review something maybe in a similar topic - but avoid conflict of interest in the future.

And sometimes the review invitation just comes in when you're too busy. Like, life is happening and there's too many things going on, or you know that you're about to be away for an extended period of time. The editor would prefer in general for you to say no to an invitation than to say yes and then for that review to be really delayed or for you to just say yes and then not be able to return the report at all because you're just too busy. That doesn't really help the editor. So again, in those cases, it's a good idea to turn down the invitation.

Often when you get an invitation to review, you might have two options in terms of turning it down. You'll have an accept, obviously, and then you might have a decline and an unavailable as the two other options and use those carefully.

So if you are given these options, you decline if it's a conflict of interest outside your expertise, ie. would never review that article. And 'unavailable' if it's just about how busy you are. Because if

you're unavailable right now, but the editor really wants you to comment on that article, then they might come back to you with a different deadline.

Mark:

Thank you, so don't be afraid to say no and say why. I think that's good advice for life generally, actually. But in this particular instance as well, so thank you very much.

I'm looking at the clock and our time is pretty much up I'm afraid, but I hope everyone listening in has found the last 30 minutes or so useful, and I've certainly learned a lot of things. So, Di, I would really like to thank you for all those good practical tips that you shared with us today. And actually, I'd like to thank you for all that your team does in training up a new generation of peer reviewers. And thank you to everybody who's listened in, thank you for those who've posted comments or questions.

We didn't quite get to answer every question that was posted, but we'll be able to message you back if you asked a question. And don't forget to find out more about those reviewer training webinars that Di mentioned. We will share a link on Twitter or, as Di said, you could Google. So if you Google "Taylor & Francis: Excellence in Peer Review" you'll be able to find them easily and also on the Taylor & Francis Editor Resources website there's a whole section about reviewer guidance, which also includes some tips actually on becoming a peer reviewer. So, lots to go away and read up on and lots of stuff to put into practice.

So, thank you again. Thank you, everybody for joining us. For now, that's the end of today's chat. Thank you very much.