Editorial of Issue 2023: On the Peer Review Process and Editorial Quality Assurance

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Abstract: Transparency in the publication process is a core value of Open Gender Journal. As a community-driven open access journal, we are committed to the principle of openness, which we understand to extend beyond access to the published articles. During the preparation of this issue, we have taken a close look at the peer review process, starting with the monitoring of review times, the development of an ethics policy, and an initial experiment with open reviews. This editorial reflects on peer review's integral role for inter- and transdisciplinary gender research by revealing the inner workings of the journal's peer review process.

Open Gender Journal Editorial; translated from German

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In the editorial for the 2021 issue, we set out our approach to manuscript selection by the editorial team (Ganz/Runge 2021). The editorial for the current issue continues our efforts to open up the editorial process. This time, we look at the journal's peer review process, a topic that the Open Gender Journal has dealt with extensively since its beginnings and in particular during the production of the current issue. For the first time, this issue contains articles that have also been openly peer-reviewed (more on this later).

In recent years, peer review has been the subject of an intense international debate on the assessment of research performance and quality. Recently, the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA) issued a high-profile statement calling for a fundamental reform of research performance assessment. This is intended to strengthen the central role of qualitative assessment through peer review. In the future, quantitative metrics such as the journal impact factor, which lead to systemic disincentives, should no longer play a role in assessing the research performance of individual researchers, for example in the context of tenure procedures, but also of research organizations and projects (CoARA 2022). This is a welcome development. However, it also shows how important it is for the academic system to take a critical look at the role of peer review. In a position paper, the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* (German Research Foundation, DFG) points out that there is no one-size-fits-all solution when it comes to peer review that is equally suitable for all publication formats and all disciplines (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft/AG Publikationswesen 2022). Factors such as the heavy workload of reviewers and the high complexity of interdisciplinary research (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft/AG Publikationswesen 2022: 33) make it necessary to develop suitable forms of quality assurance that are recognized and feasible in the community.

A transparent approach to editorial processes is part of the publication culture of the Open Gender Journal. The DFG project „Open Gender Journal – Expansionshilfe" (expansion aid), which is currently being carried out at Freie Universität Berlin and the University of Cologne, evaluates existing workflows, tests new processes and draws up recommendations. In what follows, we provide an insight into how peer review is organized in our journal, the issues we are

addressing in developing the review process, and the role played by the editorial team as curators of the review process, as well as in their own evaluation practices.

Double-anonymous review

The Open Gender Journal has established double-anonymous peer review as a quality assurance procedure for research articles when the journal was founded.[1] In this process, the editors responsible for a submission select external reviewers and ask them to review the article. They receive a thoroughly anonymized manuscript and evaluate it based on a set of guidelines containing questions about the scholarly quality of the paper. The originality of the article, its theoretical basis, its methodological approach and reliance on sources, its overall structure, the argumentative coherence, its comprehensibility and linguistic and formal criteria are assessed. Reviewers also make a final recommendation as to whether the article should be rejected, revised, accepted or resubmitted for review. The Open Gender Journal generally works with two reviews per article; in rare cases, additional peer reviews are obtained. The two responsible members of the editorial team then review the evaluations and make a decision on this basis, which gets conveyed to the authors of the article along with the content of the reviews; the names of the reviewers will remain anonymous.

By involving two external reviewers in the quality assurance, we are able to draw on in-depth specialist expertise. Reviewers are familiar with the current state of research and are generally in a better position than the editors to judge whether an article makes a new, innovative contribution to research that ties in with the current state of the art. Due to the diverse knowledge cultures presented in the field of trans- and interdisciplinary gender studies, a fair assessment of quality necessitates the adoption of a principle which considers multiple perspectives – both disciplinary and with regard to preferred schools of thought and approaches. Additionally, anonymization is crucial in ensuring that the reviews are not influenced by personal or professional relationships.

Peer review is invisible work (Kaltenbrunner/Birch/Amuchastegui 2022, 4). Writing good, meaningful, precise and helpful reviews takes a lot of time. Wolfgang Kaltenbrunner, Kean Birch and Maria Amuchastegui describe peer review as a "gift economy running on perpetually renewed experiences of mutual indebtedness among members of an intellectual community" (670). Participation in this exchange does not produce immediate benefits, as peer review, unlike

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1　Another common but ableist term for the double-anonymous assessment is "double-blind", which is no longer used by the relevant organizations (Aides 2020).

one's own publications, so far are hardly rewarded in the evaluation of academic performance.

It is therefore always a challenge to find suitable reviewers who can read and comment on articles in a timely manner. Many editorial offices therefore depend on a fixed group of reviewers from their advisory board. While this increases reliability, it also limits the pool of expertise. The Open Gender Journal's strategy is different: Reviewers are recruited specifically for each article, with members of the editorial team drawing on their personal networks, but also often making new contacts in the field, including international ones. There are now 383 peer reviewers registered with OGJ who have reviewed articles.

Quantitative monitoring and qualitative development

As part of the funded expansion of the journal, we have diligently conducted qualitative monitoring of journal activities and further developed our quality assurance procedures. For the first time, the editorial team has published a transparency report with key figures on its work for the year 2022, so that authors and other interested parties can assess OGJ and compare it with other journals. The report shows that the journal received relatively few submissions in 2022, with only 23 articles. We attribute this mainly to effects of the Covid-19 pandemic (Oleschuk 2020). According to the editorial system statistics, a total of 23 reviews were completed and 27 reviews were requested in 2022. However, the actual number of reviews requested is significantly higher, as new reviewers receive the initial request via email and their possible declines are not recorded in the system. The average time between acceptance and submission of reviews was 24 days. The average time between article submission and publication, which was 202 days, may seem unexpected at first glance. However, this statistic is still worth celebrating since the timeframe in 2021 lasted significantly longer at 369 days. Our in-depth analysis has shown that this significant change is mainly due to individual articles that required long review times and several rounds of revisions. In addition, the duration of the editorial process can be attributed to the thorough textual revisions that follow the peer review, aided by the academic editing of the editorial team. We place great importance on this step, as ensuring the coherence of the content, linguistic clarity, and formal correctness of the texts are crucial in the social sciences and humanities. Our editorial team's inter- and cross-disciplinary expertise provides authors with both breadth and depth of knowledge. Editorial support during the copy editing phase is an essential component of our quality assurance process.

An important milestone in advancing quality assurance procedures is the 2023 publication ethics guideline. The journal's guidelines for publication ethics draw from the DFG Code of Good Scientific Practice (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft 2022). Furthermore, they were meticulously formed through thorough scrutiny of the core practices of the Committee On Publication Ethics (COPE) (Committee On Publication Ethics n.d.) and tailored to the specific needs of the Open Gender Journal and intersectional gender research. With the publication ethics policy, the Open Gender Journal takes up current developments in academic practice, reflects on them against the background of their significance for the Open Science and Open Research discourse and weaves them into a careful and (self-)reflective publication practice. Our publication ethics guidelines thus represent a complementary aspect of quality assurance, as they have an impact on the journal's processes and define transparent areas of responsibility for all those involved in the publication process. The publication ethics standards not only provide information about a power-critical examination of established publication practices, but also point to the responsible role of journals in this respect. Accordingly, these guidelines also shape the journal's publication practice by providing authors, editors and reviewers with transparent information about their responsibilities in the publication process and by sensitizing editors to pay greater attention to interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity in the selection of reviewers. The publication ethics guidelines also provide clear directives for authorship and encourage authors to disclose conflicts of interest transparently. They also offer transparent guidance to all stakeholders on the importance of maintaining confidentiality and meeting agreed-upon timelines in the publication process, offering a specific procedure to follow in the event of suspected scientific misconduct. In this way, the ethical standards have an impact not only on the editorial team of the Open Gender Journal, but also on the scientific community of intersectional gender research.

To show our appreciation for their effort and expertise, we publish the names of the reviewers on our website with their consent and a time delay. As a new feature, we offer to send reviewers the other review upon request and mutual agreement, after the final editorial decision on the article has been made. We trust that reviewers will perceive this additional step in our editorial process as an added value. We expect that they will find it interesting to read a second, possibly different, opinion on an article they have worked hard on. We also want to encourage academics who have little experience of writing reviews in their work.

A First Experiment with Open Reviews

Peer review can be seen as "the central evaluation mechanism of science in the current academic system" (Riesenweber 2015, 596, translated by the authors) – however, the form in which this peer review is carried out is inconsistent. In a historical overview, Christina Riesenweber points out that the humanities and social sciences in particular rely heavily on double-anonymized peer review procedures (601; Miller/Serzan 1984, 687). In the context of open science, however, open peer review has also been discussed and tested since the 1990s, particularly in the natural sciences. The question of whether open peer review procedures can fulfill the hopes placed in them cannot be answered in general terms because of the variety of approaches: A total of seven different types can be distinguished, some having contradictory advantages and drawbacks (for an overview, see Ross-Hellauer 2017).

Particularly well known is the Open Identities variant, which moves away from (double-) anonymized procedures. On the one hand, it is hoped that disclosing the identity of both authors and reviewers will boost review quality: By identifying themselves, reviewers are expected to present superior reasoning and express themselves in a more amicable manner (Ross-Hellauer 2017, 9; Ford 2021, 4). Additionally, conflicts of interest are expected to be more easily recognized. On the other hand, there are concerns about the disclosure of identities: For example, knowledge of authors' gender, race or status could distort the review process (Huber et al. 2022). At the same time, there are concerns that authors may seek to retaliate against negative reviews and that reviewers may thus provide superficial and less critical feedback, fearing conflict or even career setbacks (Huber et al. 2022; Bravo et al. 2019, 7; Ross-Hellauer/Deppe/Schmidt 2017, 22).

In surveys, the traditional belief persists that double-anonymization is the best way to ensure an unbiased evaluation (Neumann 2023, 11, 21; Ross-Hellauer/Deppe/Schmidt 2017, 22). The adaptation of open peer review procedures strongly depends on the cultural circumstances of the discipline. Skepticism towards open identity peer review is particularly evident among humanities scholars and social scientists. This is partly attributed to the fact that the preprint culture is more pronounced in STEM subjects so that the identity of the authors is already known or can be easily revealed (Neumann 2023). Expert interviews with stakeholders in gender studies conducted as part of the "Open Gender Platform" project indicate that the majority of respondents are against publi-

shing expert opinions. However, there is great interest in processes that focus on peer-to-peer exchange.

For this reason, the editorial team decided to experiment with an open review format, in which the review of an article is carried out by peers, with disclosed names and in a dialogue-oriented manner that is not publicly accessible. The articles in the "Digital Gender" section served as an example. This section was set up for the publication of contributions to the conference "Digital Gender: Ethik, Macht und (Geschlechter-)Wissen in Systemen künstlicher Intelligenz" (Digital Gender: Ethics, Power and (Gender) Knowledge in Artificial Intelligence Systems), which was organized by the GenderConceptGroup at TU Dresden in 2022. The submissions received by the Open Gender Journal indicate a high level of interest in the topic of current technology discourses, and its impact on heterogeneous gender relations from an ethical, moral, and power-critical perspective.

For the review of the submitted manuscripts, a double-anonymous review was combined with an open review. External reviewers conducted the anonymous review as described above, while section editors carried out the open review. The inclusion of an open review was seen as an opportunity to gain new insights into the status quo of quality assurance processes in intersectional gender research, which already critically examines power relations, and to create new perspectives beyond an anonymous review. The same review form used for the anonymous review was utilized. The reviewers evaluated the text with the knowledge of the authors and are informed that their names will also be disclosed. However, the evaluation of the individual and very heterogeneous reviews has shown that under these conditions, the open review does not make a crucial difference compared to the previous anonymous procedure. Both the professional quality and the tone of the reviews remained unchanged. So far, this experiment has also not led to any exchange between the authors and reviewers after the review. The only benefit of revealing reviewer identities is promoting transparency. Usually, the editorial team lacks information to rule out possible bias on the part of the reviewers. Therefore, during anonymous procedures, it is to some extent up to the reviewers to "guess" the manuscript origin, evaluating their own potential bias, and disclosing it to the editorial team. In the case of open identities, both sides have the opportunity to point out potential biases, reject a review, or find an appropriate way to deal with them. This is particularly useful for niche specialized communities and for conference publications where the participants are known to their community. Therefore, we contend that open peer review is well-suited for publication projects such as special issues or conferences within a research context as an addition to anonymous procedures.

Overall, however, the chosen open review process has not led to any disruptive changes in the journal's work processes. We attribute this to the fact that, in addition to the (anonymous) reviews, the text is subject to a high-quality, engaged, and collegial discussion. This is due to the intensive editorial supervision of the articles, where the editors assume the role ideally assigned to the (non-anonymous) reviewers in open review procedures. This points to the central role of editorial quality assurance, especially in scholar-led journals such as the Open Gender Journal, which is often neglected in debates about different review processes.

Conclusion

Despite the changes that have taken place in recent years and that will continue to take place in the future, peer review remains a cornerstone of academic publishing. It is not only the reviewers who are responsible for the quality of peer review, but also the editorial teams who organize and integrate review procedures into their publication processes. From the outset, the Open Gender Journal has endeavored to establish quality assurance procedures that not only meet current standards, but are also tailored to the needs of inter- and transdisciplinary gender research and critically engage with power relations in academia. We are committed to continually evaluating these processes and developing them further where necessary. As a scholar-led open access journal, we welcome current international developments in the field of research evaluation. These are currently moving away from quantitative indicators such as citation indices, which indirectly assess the quality of academic publications based on the journal in which they are published. Reform efforts such as those proposed in the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA) agreement, which call for a return to qualitative assessment of academic performance, strengthen small, independent publishing venues such as the Open Gender Journal.

However, this development also raises the question of how to organize an expected further increase in the demand for peer reviews, not only for journal articles, but ultimately for all forms of scholarly output. Another challenge is the growing diversity of formats for scholarly communication: scholars have long since moved beyond traditional publishing formats to write blogs, publish podcasts and open educational resources. And academic journals are developing new formats that not only communicate the final results of research projects, but also accompany the entire research process. Appropriate forms of quality assurance need to be capable of expertly assessing scientific quality, but which

are also manageable in practice for the already overburdened members of the scientific community.

In our view, the idea of (partially) automating this very demanding work through artificial intelligence is not a convincing alternative, nor is an uncontrolled open review of the final version by the interested public. These questions will certainly continue to occupy the Open Gender Journal in the years to come.

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