Reviewing articles for tourism and hospitality journals: an altruistic academic tradition or a service to be paid for?

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Abstract: Tourism and hospitality journals – just as in other disciplines – have adopted a voluntary model of the peer review system. This paper argues that under the changing circumstances and norms, a transition to a commercial model should be considered. Such a model is expected to significantly reduce the problems associated with the current voluntary model such as the ‘tragedy of the reviewer commons’ and the ‘free-rider problem’, and relieve the heavy burden on journal editors of finding suitable referees to review articles. A commercial model is also an ethically preferred option since within its framework reviewers are properly rewarded for their expertise, energy, and time. The proposal is likely to encounter opposition from those who view the voluntary system as an enlightened academic tradition, but a careful examination of the subject suggests that the commercial model has real potential to solve many of the problems that characterise the current broken model.

Keywords: peer review; voluntary model; commercial model; referees; rewards.

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Introduction

Academic activity and productivity in the disciplines of tourism and hospitality is at an unprecedented peak. The number of journal titles in the field has grown from fewer than ten prior to 1980 to nearly 300 today, with approximately 150 published in English. In 2014, more than 2,100 academic articles were published in the field – a sharp increase from the slightly over 1,000 articles published in 2006, and from fewer than 200 articles per year published before 1990. The result, according to McKercher and Tung (2015, p.306), is that “[T]ourism research and education has evolved from a peripheral area of study explored as a side interest by a small group of scholars from different disciplines into a recognised, mainstream field in its own right”.

As a means of establishing the field as an independent, trustworthy, and innovative academic discipline, the vast majority of tourism and hospitality journals have adopted a double-blind peer review system, in which both the reviewer and the author are anonymous to one another. Under this system, editors rely on the peer reviewers’ experience and scientific expertise to guarantee the academic quality and thoroughness of the papers published in their journals. The principle aim of the anonymity of both the referees and the authors is to ensure impartial and fair reviews. Although editors exercise discretion in publishing papers, it is recognised that the reviewer is of the utmost importance in ensuring the academic quality of the tourism and hospitality discipline in general, and of its journals in particular (Law et al., 2013).

The rapid and impressive growth of the tourism and hospitality field requires journal editors to deal with an increasing number of articles being submitted for consideration of publication (McKercher, 2005, 2015). Swamped by these submissions, editors face the difficult challenge of choosing the most appropriate ones for their journals. This creates an ever greater dependence on the willingness of competent researchers to review articles and provide detailed reports on the quality and suitability of the paper for the journal, and, to the extent possible, making constructive comments and suggestions for improvement. By and large, tourism and hospitality journals – similarly to those in other disciplines – rely on the goodwill of scholars to invest their time and energy in reviewing papers without receiving financial compensation or any other direct material rewards.

Although this volunteer model of the review market is adopted almost without exception in academia in general, and in academic journals in tourism and hospitality in particular, it is argued in this opinion paper that, in view of the changing developments and circumstances, there is a need to rethink the effectiveness of this model. Specifically, it is recommended that the adoption of a commercial model of the review market be considered favourably as a solution to the problems arising with the traditional model and its limitations. It should be noted that the purpose of this article is to undermine the existing approach to peer review and to stimulate discussion on the subject among researchers and scholars, rather than to present a detailed alternative model. Drawing the specific practical lines of the commercial model is a separate task reserved for future discussions and articles.

The volunteer model of the review market

The current peer review system in tourism and hospitality journals is based on the goodwill and the spirit of scholarly commitment of researchers. Many researchers are
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willing to undertake unpaid reviewing tasks simply because they are interested in
positively influencing their discipline and wish to maintain a high quality of research in
the field. Furthermore, typical indoctrination in the academia includes messages that
courage service to the academic community and adherence to the golden rule – because
others review the articles you submit to journals, you should respond favourably when
asked to do so and review the works of other peers as well. According to the view of peer
review as a community service, scholars should demonstrate solidarity and altruism in
giving something back to the academic community that has helped them build their own
careers.

Another perception – which often coincides with those mentioned above – is that the
salary paid to researchers by the universities that employ them already includes
compensation for service to the academic community, in the form of putting scholars’
scientific and critical-reading skills to work promoting the research published in their
field. Traditionally, academic journals have been published by university presses and
other non-profit publishers, and therefore it would seem unfair to demand payment from
them. It should be noted that this system – which does not involve payment and
expectation of material reward – is perceived by many as less ignoble and more
beneficial than other prevalent social interactions.

Although this volunteer model is widely accepted in the academic world, in recent
years, there have been noticeable cracks in it. Journals are facing an increasing number of
submissions for consideration of publication, and difficulties in finding suitable reviewers
for each article have become one of the greatest challenges of current editorial work. On
the other hand, researchers often report that they are bombarded by journals in their field
with requests to review articles – considered as one of the most difficult and time-
consuming tasks in academia (Gusterson, 2012). Consequently, journals are struggling to
recruit appropriate referees to review articles.

Given the nature of this state of affairs, journals and editors have sought to offer
incentives to researchers to increase responsiveness to requests for reviewing papers
(Gasparyan et al., 2015). Some journals (e.g., Tourism Recreation Research) publish an
annual ‘Thank You’, listing the reviewers serving during the past year. Other journals
(e.g., International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management) go further and
annually commend outstanding reviewers who have made an exceptional contribution to
the journal. Another common means to incentivise reviewers is to place them in
prestigious positions on journal editorial boards. Some journals also offer reviewers a
free subscription, although this is somewhat questionable compensation since in most
cases the academic institution that the researcher works for already has subscribed.

A major problem with the current voluntary system is that it tends to be slow, as
many referees take their time completing reviews and even drop out during the process;
thus, editors find themselves chasing after reviewers to submit their reports. Nevertheless,
it is almost impossible to punish this problematic behaviour in light of the anonymity that
characterises the process and the fact that reviewers work voluntarily. Another problem
is, of course, the refusal of many scholars to take on reviewing in the first place. The
main reasons that lead researchers to decline invitations to review articles are lack of time
and heavy workload, in addition to requests for them to review papers not within their
area of expertise (Tite and Schroter, 2007). Another reason for the current pressure on the
peer review system lies in authors who rely on the free-of-charge system, often not
submitting their articles to the journals most suitable for their work, but rather to those that are the most prestigious in hopes of somehow winning favourable reviews.

Whatever the reason, the voluntary system is clearly in crisis today as the growing stream of papers being submitted to journals creates a situation in which demand for review exceeds supply. It has become increasingly difficult to recruit competent reviewers, and experience in many journals shows that often, in order to secure 2–3 high-quality reviewers for a given paper, it is necessary to nominate and invite at least 8–10 potential reviewers. Fox and Petchey (2010, p.325) identified this as a classic state of the tragedy of the commons, ‘in which individuals have every incentive to exploit the ‘reviewer commons’ by submitting papers, but little or no incentive to contribute reviews’. In their efforts to deal with the sheer number of submitted papers, many editors choose to initially screen them themselves, and desk reject many manuscripts before they can be peer reviewed. Despite the popularity of this practice, particularly in the higher-ranking journals, it is claimed that this undermines the reputation of the peer review system and cannot serve as substitute for a thorough and anonymous review performed by external experts.

In addition to the aforementioned incentives offered by many journals, some have suggested tackling the problem of the tragedy of the commons in the voluntary review market with punitive practices, although most of these proposals have not been implemented. Some propose to blacklist slow reviewers, and there are those who have even suggested online shaming – publicising the names of rogue scholars who refuse to review papers and to contribute their fair share to the academic community [e.g., via tourism research information network (TRINET)]. Less aggressive measures offered include expanding the pool of potential reviewers and including more research students and researchers from developing countries in that pool. However, it is hard to see how these steps would solve the problem, as research students are already struggling to manage work and assignments for relatively modest financial compensation, and recruiting reviewers from developing countries would likely complicate the process due to lack of familiarity with the review process and invite language difficulties.

So how can thoughtful, competent, and constructive reviewers be engaged under the changing circumstances and the heavy burden placed on the peer review system? Have editors been sentenced to a reality in which they are forced to spend their time and energy finding reviewers and trying to walk between the raindrops, so as not to exert too much pressure on already overworked and fatigued referees? It seems that all the suggestions mentioned above for improving the voluntary system address only the symptoms, and are therefore unlikely to make a significant change, if at all. The root cause of the tragedy of the reviewer commons requires rethinking the existing voluntary system and examining the possibility of moving to a commercial system, one that abandons the archaic conception of unpaid community service and compensates scholars and researchers for their time and expertise.

3 The commercial model of the review market

The concept of the peer review system as one based on reciprocity, solidarity, and ethical commitment to the academic community has been challenged in recent years. Today, prominent academic journals in tourism and hospitality are being published by giant for-profit publishing houses such as Elsevier (e.g., Annals of Tourism Research, Tourism...
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Management, and International Journal of Hospitality Management), Taylor and Francis (e.g., Current Issues in Tourism, Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing, and Journal of Human Resources in Hospitality and Tourism), Wiley-Blackwell (International Journal of Tourism Research), and Emerald Group Publishing (e.g., International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management, International Journal of Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research, and Tourism Review). There is no doubt that the considerable profits of these companies are also made possible by the volunteer work of referees, some of whom are beginning to wonder whether they are being exploited in the name of community service.

Although the voluntary model of the review market is still prevalent in academia in general, and in tourism and hospitality in particular, one can already see the first glimpses of journals that have moved to adopt the commercial model of the review market – one that is ideally based on recognizing the valuable work of reviewers with equivalent financial compensation. The great burden on the peer review system, the difficulty of finding suitable referees who agree to voluntarily review papers, and the above-mentioned frustration of reviewers who feel exploited have led a few journals (not yet from the field of tourism and hospitality) to begin experimenting with payment for review (e.g., Collabra: Psychology – an open access journal from the University of California Press, and the three open access journals of the London-based publisher Veruscript). As can be expected, this has led to intense discussion and debate in professional academic circles (e.g., The Chronicle of Higher Education) about the effectiveness, efficiency, and morality of this step vis-a-vis the traditional volunteer model of peer review.

The idea of transforming a long-established academic institution based on volunteerism, communalism, and trust to one based on monetary transaction is perceived by many as an affront, since according to this view, peer review is not supposed to be a commodity, but rather honourable service. Yet, as noted by Thapliyal (2016), “[w]hen a proud tradition is defended from criticism solely on the basis of its heritage, that should be treated as a sign that the system is broken” (para 9). After all, scholars and researchers receive financial compensation for reviewing books, payment for publishing op-eds in newspapers, and royalties for published books. It appears that there is no convincing reason why one should specifically exclude peer review of academic articles from the conventional view that people should be properly compensated for their time, energy, and expertise. Whatever the reason, a growing number of scholars believe that payment for review is inevitable in order for the peer review system to survive (Rowland, 2002).

A common concern of switching to a commercial peer review system is that reviewers will place increased emphasis on speed at the expense of quality in order to review more papers and make more money, which can lead to negligent and hurriedly reviewed reports. However, this argument suffers from considerable weaknesses. Issues related to ethics and integrity will always be relevant to any review system, yet it is difficult to see why a commercial system is more vulnerable to abuse than a voluntary system. If in a commercial system a referee has an interest in reviewing quickly in order to earn more money, this would occur even more so in a system where he does not receive any remuneration (or any other significant recognition) for his time-consuming, tedious, and typically thankless work. In addition, in a voluntary system, the reviewer has an interest in maintaining his standing as a good citizen in the academic community. The same is true for a reviewer in a commercial system, along with the interest of preserving
his reputation as an efficient, thorough and diligent referee in order to secure future invitations to review.

Empirical studies reinforce the notion that a commercial review system should be seriously considered because it has clear advantages over the existing system. For example, the editors of *Journal of Public Economics* (Chetty et al., 2014, p.186) conducted a randomised control trial with journal peer reviewers and found that ‘cash incentives can generate significant improvements in review times and also increase referees’ willingness to submit reviews’. Furthermore, contrary to the concerns raised, paying reviewers did not crowd out the intrinsic non-financial motivation for doing high-quality work, as even after the payment treatment ended, the reviewers continued submitting their reports on time. The researchers concluded that price incentives are effective in increasing pro-social behaviour among reviewers, without negatively impacting on review quality, and therefore should be positively considered.

Other legitimate concerns have been raised about the commercial model of the review market. When reviewers have a clear conflict of interests (for example, when they are asked to review a paper written by a close associate, or when the article deals with a subject in which they have commercial interests), they are expected to decline reviewing as they might not be able to remain impartial. Some worry that money may ‘blind the eyes of the wise and pervert the words of the righteous’, as referees might agree to be reviewers despite the questionable circumstances only because of the payment offered. A similar challenging situation can arise when, after consenting to review because of financial motivation, the reviewer feels obliged to complete the process even though he is not comfortable with the material in the article (for example when it is not in his field of expertise, or when he is not familiar with the specific methodology). Another concern with regard to the commercial model is that journal editors will begin to skimp on invitations to review and may not ask for more feedback just because of the added cost of each reviewer.

There is no denying that these are ethical issues that must be considered when implementing the commercial model, yet they are not essentially different from many other moral dilemmas that researchers encounter during their paid academic work. As noted by Bionaz (2013), there are concerns for conflict of interest within the current voluntary review system, as well as problems of indifferent judges or those suffering from the Dunning-Kruger effect (cognitive bias in which low-ability individuals are incapable of accurately recognising their incompetence or ignorance). The mere transition to a commercial review market will raise the need to address these issues more intensely and find appropriate solutions, but it will not be the sole or even the main reason for their formation. A possible solution – whether in a voluntary or a commercial system – is to publically name the reviewers, a practice already implemented by several journals. Since no scientist will want to be associated as a referee of a failed and sloppy academic paper, this will increase the motivation of reviewers to do thorough work, and decline reviewing when the article is not within their field of expertise.

The commercial model of the review market has other advantages besides providing adequate financial incentives to the reviewers, making the peer review process faster and more efficient, and increasing the pool of potential referees. In order to fund the payment to reviewers, it is likely that many journals will begin to charge submission fees (a practice which is currently common only in open access journals), which will discourage bogus, frivolous, and/or unrealistic submissions and will encourage researchers to submit their articles to the most appropriate, rather than the most
prestigious or highly-ranked journal (Harnad, 2010). This in itself will help streamline the peer review system and ease the unreasonable number of article submissions confronting journal editors and their reviewers. In many such journals, under certain conditions, one can ask for a submission fee waiver, thus, reducing the potential implication that journals will be blocked to researchers from developing countries or academic institutions that cannot afford payment.

4 From theory to practice: show me the money

The implementation of the commercial model can be articulated in many ways, and the policy derived from it will undoubtedly be the subject of extensive discussion among scholars and other stakeholders in tourism and hospitality research. Although, as noted, the purpose of this paper is not to go into detailed administrative issues, the following are two possible approaches for implementing the commercial model of the review market. These approaches can be applied separately or in combination with other models, in accordance with the strategic policy of each publisher and/or journal in the field. The first model is based on the pioneering policy implemented in the journal Collabra: Psychology, which provides reviewers with direct financial rewards. The second model is based on the proposal of Fox and Petchey (2010), which aims to neutralise the ability of researchers to abuse the peer review system, and requires them to ‘pay’ for submitting articles by performing reviews.

Collabra: Psychology is an open access journal that charges authors $875 USD for article processing if their article is accepted for publication. Of this amount, $250 is transferred to a ‘Research Community Fund’, while the remainder ($625) is allocated to cover the administrative and marketing costs of the journal. Once a quarter, every reviewer who worked for the journal can decide whether he/she would like to receive the amount accumulated in his/her name in cash, to donate the money to a waiver fund in order to support authors who lack funding and cannot afford the submission fee, or to transfer the amount to their university’s open access fund. The model used by Veruscript is quite similar, plus the possibility that reviewers can accumulate credit for use as authors in their future submissions to the publisher’s journals.

Interestingly, Veruscript estimates that only about 30% of the referees pocketed the money, and, similarly, most of Collabra’s reviewers chose to donate the money that they had credited to assist under-budgeted researchers (Matthews, 2016). Certainly, in order to reach more firm conclusions, this subject should be examined empirically. However, at least from the anecdotes above, it seems that the implementation of a commercial model does not crowd out altruistic motivations of collegiality and commitment to the academic community. For reviewers who choose the payment option – it is now fairly easy to transfer money globally, for example via PayPal, although there are those who will have to solve tax-related problems, and there might be issues with currency exchange. It is proposed that in order to solve such problems, the referees should also be offered the option of redeeming the money that they have earned with gift cards (e.g., Amazon), or of donating the money to a recognised charity of their choice.

The main concern that might be raised regarding the above payment model is that it may create a disproportionate pool of reviewers; i.e., scientists who need additional income will review many papers, while others will feel exempt from this task. As argued
by Fox and Petchey (2010), exorbitant payments might be required in order to attract referees who would not otherwise agree to review. To deal with this problem and with other issues related to the tragedy of the reviewer commons, the researchers suggested an alternative model in which authors will have to pay for their journal submissions with a novel currency called PubCreds. Under the proposed model, scholars and researchers will accumulate PubCreds credit by reviewing papers (a completed peer review pays one unit of PubCreds), and only then will they be able to submit articles for publication (each submission of manuscript costs three units of PubCreds).

Although this model does not utilise conventional monetary transactions, it is offered as a way to privatise the reviewer commons by ‘creating a direct link between an individual’s reviews and submissions’ [Fox and Petchey, (2010), p.328]. This suggestion sounds fair, mainly because it neutralises the free-rider problem in the current voluntary system and causes the researchers who put the most burden on the peer review system to help it work more smoothly. Any journal or publishing house can establish its own PubCreds, but it is reasonable to assume that in time major publishers and journals will cooperate and enable ‘common currency trading’. The technology for operating such a system already exists; in 2012, a website and global database was launched in New Zealand, called Publons, which records registered scientists’ peer review work and gives them official approval for their list of article reviews (Meyts et al., 2016). Today, this is especially beneficial as academic service can be added to résumé or job applications (Harris, 2017), but it is certainly possible to use a similar system to implement the PubCreds model as well. At least for some researchers (particularly those at the beginning of their academic career), it is important to carry out reviews for leading academic journals because listing this experience will upgrade their résumé.

Of course, it is possible to combine the two approaches described above, and it is reasonable to assume that the technical details of the ideal commercial model of the review market will be discussed at length in future articles, conferences, forums, and other settings for debates. Most of all, a conceptual change is required in relation to peer review and its essence, including disengagement from the overly romantic and archaic view of peer review as a public service to the academic community. Once this perception permeates and we see a demand for a transition to the commercial model among tourism and hospitality scholars, we are likely to observe various initiatives and models that will translate it from theory into practice.

5 Concluding remarks

As noted by Shani and Arad (2015, p.350), “[t]ourism and hospitality studies are a relatively young academic discipline, unbounded to established schools of thought originated in traditional fields of study. As such, this can serve as an independent platform for critical, challenging, and encompassing investigation of tourism related-issues”. One of the pioneers of tourism research, Prof. Pizam (2011), has often made it clear that the main challenge facing scholars in the field is to position tourism and hospitality research as an independent discipline in which innovative theories, methodologies, and applications are developed within, rather than simply borrowed from other traditional disciplines, and superficially applied to tourism and hospitality settings. There is no apparent reason why our discipline should lag behind regarding the attempts to reform the current broken peer review system in academia. The publishers and journals
in the field, along with the editors, editorial boards, scientists, practitioners, and other stakeholders must be proactive and influence the future of the peer review system, which has a pivotal central role in producing quality publications and promoting human knowledge.

This article argues that the voluntary model should be abandoned in favor of a commercial model of the review market. However, there is room and need for empirical studies to examine the issues discussed in this manuscript. Future research should assess the attitudes of tourism and hospitality researchers regarding the commercial model and its actual implementation, as well as conduct experiments that evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of using financial rewards in the peer review system. Most of all, it is to be hoped that this article will instigate further discussion on a subject that frustrates many editors and researchers, but only few dare to challenge its traditional premises. Mark Twain wrote that ‘the less there is to justify a traditional custom, the harder it is to get rid of it’. Indeed, it is increasingly difficult to justify the current review system, and we have the task of proving that we can transcend tradition and explore new ways to do our work better.

References


