



# ELECTRONOTES

WEBNOTE 11    2/22/2013

ENWN11

## (1) PEER REVIEW INTRACTABILITY:

### OFTEN A BRICKWALL IS HIT

## (2) “NOT-PEER-REVIEWED” - AS A HAMMER

About 6 months ago, I was thinking about writing up some thoughts on “Peer Review” as it is currently in practice, and in mal-practice. As is often the case, what seems like a couple of paragraphs (a couple of pages at most) tends to expand, and become something that just doesn’t want to be finished. I worked on it from time to time.

And as time passed, I noticed that several other postings were appearing that were disdainful of peer review (perhaps I was just paying more attention). At the end of this note there are numerous Internet links along these lines. The selection could have been different and could easily be expanded. For example, you just need to follow the additional links in the ones provided and/or Google “Peer Review is XXXXX” (fill in your own invective).

There is a lot of food for thought in what has been written. For my part, I favor this sort of discussion of peer review because so many people assume peer review works quite well, and means a lot more than it really does. In a future note, I will have a longer offering. So while I pretty much endorse the attempts mentioned in these links (to “improve” the procedure), here I will mention just two issues that I have not really seen addressed elsewhere: (1) that the procedure is too often virtually intractable (a brickwall) from the beginning, and (2) that the absence of peer review has become a “hammer” to use against another person’s views, way out of proportion to what any lack of peer review should imply by way of significance.

## THE BRICKWALL PROBLEM:

Despite better judgment to the contrary, let's assume the reviewer agrees to accommodate an editor and do the review – at least pretending to find the time and motivation. You soon (usually right after barely understanding the abstract!) come to something you don't understand. If it's your own colleague or student, you would just run down the hall or fire off an email. But you are anonymous, and anyway, the general reader won't necessarily be able to ask and expect a response. But you are likely to be stuck with the fact that you don't understand one or many things in the paper. Now – how secure are you? You can't help wondering if perhaps you are just too stupid! This predicament is not fundamentally all that different from picking up a published paper and simply trying to read it for purposes of your own - except for the pressure - and the complication that this paper under review might really is flawed, by definition.

If you reject the paper for lack of clarity – perhaps you are the only person in the field who will fail to “get it”. You have to be really comfortable with your own abilities and accomplishments to associate something you don't understand with someone else's failure to communicate. You are probably right – the work may well be at least unclear, or even wrong. After all, they asked you to review it. Are you not accordingly presumed to be of typical knowledgeability (or well above average competence) in the area? If you can't get into the paper, isn't that reason enough to reject it? Perhaps. But still you are supposed to state your reasons.

## THE HAMMER PROBLEM:

The ordinary person hearing that a “paper” (a publication, a “study” or “article”) is “Peer Reviewed” supposes that that **MUST means something special**. They may tell you that it is some sort of guarantee that the paper is correct. Doesn't it mean that experts in the field have looked at it and decided it is correct? As such, it seems quite a bit like the familiar case of a teacher grading an exam. (This supposition would be at least partly silly. If there were in fact a group of people who could determine that a paper was “correct” in all respects - part of the “body of knowledge”, than this group could or should have written it up themselves.) It's not at all like a teacher who knows the “right answers”.

Observers with more reserve may say rather that it merely means that a few persons with enough specific knowledge of the particular field that is the subject of the paper have read it and determined that it has no obvious flaws and that it should be published so that a more general readership can consider if it will subsequently be found to be right (most likely) or wrong (possibly). This second view is closer to the truth.

However, in today's world, it seems that as common as a suggestion of imprimatur (that a certain paper is peer reviewed – with associated positive connotation), is the **denigration of a paper by the negative: the paper was NOT peer reviewed**. That descriptive is usually employed in a pejorative sense, that the paper is quite possibly even deceptively wrong – indeed the paper may have been “pure invention” for all the characterization suggests. Typically such a paper may be published on an internet site or on a blog. Not untypically, the attached “Not Peer Reviewed” label is associated with a controversial topic. In such cases, not unusually, the person who is making the disparagement does not even know what peer review involves – and has not likely even seen, let alone understood the paper – it's just a convenient “dig” that sounds impressive.

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