

# **An Analysis of the Pros and Cons of Peer Review for *Art Documentation***

*By*

Rebecca Price

Architecture & Urban Planning and Visual Resources Librarian  
University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

Art Libraries Society of North America  
2006

The following report is a review and analysis of the question of peer review, particularly as it relates to the ARLIS/NA serial publication, *Art Documentation*. The question of peer review is framed in terms of value versus cost, because it is in many ways a tradeoff. When thinking of the value it brings, one necessarily has to consider the cost it incurs.

It is worth beginning by outlining some of the basic facts and accepted pros and cons of peer review. Peer review is a widely acknowledged and often expected form of status and approval in scholarly publishing. Traditionally it has been an important component of scholarly debate and has added a means to measure value in a characteristically subjective realm. Peer review can screen out poorly conceived and poorly presented work. It offers a necessary check of new ideas and methodologies. It assures quality research and thereby contributes to the scholarly standing of a publication. Publishing in peer-reviewed journals reflects this status back on the authors, and thus can be instrumental in aiding their career development and promotion. These are valuable qualities for both the individual professional and the profession in general.

Yet there is a downside to peer review, and it is a process that is not without expense. The process can be "arbitrary, subjective, and secretive" (Kassier and Campion, 96). At times the capricious nature of peer review may simply reflect the difference of opinion, experience, or expertise held by the readers. The lesson is that there need to be clear expectations and standards set for the community. The process needs to be transparent.<sup>1</sup> There are three particular factors or costs that must be considered. The most significant is the time added to the publishing process: time for solicitation of reviews, time for the actual review, time for revisions based on suggestions of the reviewer, and time for final edits. In addition the community of scholars must be sufficiently large to maintain the process by providing broad, varied, and anonymous input.<sup>2</sup> Finally, the content to be reviewed must be suitable for peer review.

Electronic publishing brings an added twist that may or may not be relevant to this discussion, but in today's world with its steady march to electronic publishing it should be mentioned at least briefly. With the advent and acceptance of electronic journals, the publishing process has quickened dramatically. Often the time required for the peer review process is neither available nor deemed worth the cost. Instead, higher value is placed on getting the content to the community quickly without peer review. In an attempt

---

<sup>1</sup> A. Mulligan outlines criteria for this transparency and includes the following characteristics: a [stated] policy on anonymity; a policy statement on whether all articles are sent out for review; information on how the reviewers are selected; number of reviewers typically involved; expected length of the review process; the protocol a reviewer is expected to follow (criteria for publication evaluation); how the final decision is made; how the referee's remarks are communicated to the author; a statement on conflicts of interest (e.g., cases where referees have recently collaborated with the author); rejection rates; feedback to referees. (Mulligan, 140).

<sup>2</sup> There is a debate in the community about the value of anonymous (blind or double-blind) peer review. While it is generally believed that anonymity of the reviewer (if not the author, also) helps avoid the "politics" in the review, it actually had little effect on the quality of the review. (Mulligan, 139) Anonymity is particularly difficult in "niche" communities where there are few experts.

to recapture some of the value brought by the review process, some electronic journals are experimenting with the idea of peer commentary. In this process, the article is posted and the community as a whole posts responses and commentary to an article online. While the advantage of this process is speed and there is potential for lively community discussion and involvement, there are several disadvantages. Comments are not anonymous and therefore may be watered down or may potentially lead to division and acrimony in the community. Often commentary falls to those who have time to comment, not necessarily to those who have the expertise (Harnad, 2). Another disadvantage is that there is not yet a model for understanding the finished product. Is it the first article posted, the article plus commentary, or the article with changes based on the commentary?

How do the costs of time and expertise affect *Art Documentation* and its potential for peer review? In a recent issue of *Art Documentation*, Zimon and Markson report that at present our editing process takes about one and a half months (39). Add to that the time for soliciting commentary from a reviewer (or reviewers) and for the author's revisions, and the length of time for the process would conceivably double to at least three months. J. Richardson notes that on average, an article takes just under four months to undergo the peer review process. (vii). While the expertise required for peer review is not lacking in our membership, tapping into that expertise, keeping the pool of experts large and diverse enough to maintain fresh perspectives and anonymity would be no small task. In other words, the costs are relatively high. That is not to say they are without value.

This past August, several members noted on the ARLIS-L listserv the value of publishing in a peer-reviewed journal for their professional development (see ARLIS-L archives for Aug. 17-18, 2006). In some cases, librarians seek tenure or promotion and publication is a crucial part of their tenure dossier. In addition, it was suggested that our society, and even our profession, would be taken more seriously if publishing a peer-reviewed journal rather than a journal without peer review. The *Art Documentation* editors, the Publications Committee, the Executive Board, and the ARLIS/NA membership at large can and should discuss the value versus the cost of peer review for *Art Documentation*.

While matters of time and expertise are important to the debate, we should also consider the relevance of the peer review process to the content of *Art Documentation*. To make that abstract question more concrete, it is useful to look carefully at recent *Art Documentation* articles. For this analysis, the content of volumes 23 and 24 (Spring and Fall 2004 and Spring and Fall 2005) were examined. Using the *WilsonSelect Index*, one can create a list of "articles" by pulling up all entries for the journal for 2004 and 2005. 82 "articles" are listed. They include:

48 book reviews (approx. 60%) [note: book reviews are now online and are no longer printed in *Art Documentation*]

5 miscellaneous pieces (including a note "from the editors", the TOC (Fall 2005), listing of publications received (Fall 2005), a keynote address from a conference).

29 “articles” (approx. 35%)

4 “self-referential articles” – dealing with ARLIS history or ARLIS taking a stance (e.g., The resolution concerning the impact of the war in Iraq).

3 “reporter” articles – one article about an exhibition, one about a collection, and one describing the destruction of libraries and museums in Iraq.

2 interviews

20 professional issue-oriented articles

library services (4), online and print resources (4), visual resources—access (4), development and fund-raising (2), cataloging and intellectual access (1), bibliographic instruction (1), copyright, (1) visual resources—cataloging (1), library profession (1), and collection development (1)

The numbers indicate that almost 65% of the content of these two volumes is book reviews and miscellaneous pieces, none of which is suitable for peer review. Further, one can remove the book reviews from the discussion since they are now placed online for reasons of relevancy and immediacy. The five miscellaneous entries such as a singular table of contents from one issue, a listing of publications, and a keynote address from an annual conference, are clearly not fodder for peer review. This leaves the twenty-nine articles including four “self-referential” articles that discussed ARLIS/NA history or opinion, three “reporter” articles that were the type of material one might expect in a newspaper article describing a new collection, an exhibition, or an event, two interviews, and twenty “issue-oriented” articles. The articles about ARLIS/NA history, those reporting on exhibitions or events and the interviews do not lend themselves to peer review. The culling process leaves one finally with twenty “issue-oriented” articles (less than 25% of the content of *Art Documentation* over the two year study period) that might be suitable for peer review.

The twenty articles are described as “issue-oriented” because they deal with various issues which arts librarians face (library services, collection development, evaluation of online and print resources, fund raising, bibliographic instruction, visual resources, cataloging and intellectual access, etc.). While the “self-referential” and “reporter-type” articles mentioned above are interesting and of great value to the ARLIS/NA community, it is these “issue-oriented” articles that are the meat of *Art Documentation*. They inform us about our profession and our roles as arts librarians, they allow us to share our experiences and to learn from one another. The journal offers an important and significant venue for communication beyond the conference, which is limited to those who can attend. But are they suitable for peer review?

The literature about peer review reveals that while it is a process adopted by journals in the humanities, it is a tool intrinsic to the process of scientific inquiry. This bias both reflects and highlights the essential nature of peer review to the sciences. A hypothesis is stated, evidence is presented, conclusions are drawn and the review of that body of research spurs another hypothesis; and the process of scientific inquiry continues. Similarly in the humanities, a hypothesis is stated, research evidence is brought to bear on

that hypothesis, and conclusions are presented. The review of that material adds to the conversation driving inquiry and scholarship forward. This spiraling, constructive process of hypothesis, evidence, conclusion, hypothesis, etc. is not typical to the type of article that appears in *Art Documentation*. Rarely does the author present a hypothesis that must be backed and confirmed by evidence. In most cases, rather than presenting research and conclusions, the article is an account of the librarian's experiences on the job, with a service, or with a resource. This is vital information to the society and, as stated before, the journal provides a crucial venue for communication within and outside the ARLIS/NA community. Not everyone can attend the conference every year, but every member receives or has access to the journal. However valuable the information may be to the ARLIS/NA membership, whether it is appropriate for peer review is another question. That question is what must be mulled over and considered as we think about peer review for *Art Documentation*.

In conclusion, the question of whether *Art Documentation* becomes a peer-reviewed journal comes down to learning and addressing what ARLIS/NA members need from their journal. Does the membership think that peer review is relevant to the current content? If so, how should we institute a peer review process? If not, does the content need to change to become relevant to the peer review process? Or is the value of having a peer-reviewed journal worth the cost of producing one? Are there other suitable venues for the members to publish peer-reviewed articles? Perhaps a compromise is worth considering. One or two peer-reviewed articles could be included with each issue. These articles would be more research-oriented than the current articles in *Art Documentation* – perhaps offering research recently conducted by a member or presenting a collaborative project where methodologies were tested or data collected. There are many types of articles that could fall into this category, but they would necessarily be somewhat different from the current content of *Art Documentation*. This scenario raises the issue of whether an article or two per issue can raise the journal to the level of being considered a peer-reviewed journal.<sup>3</sup>

These are a few of the questions that we as an organization must consider and answer as we explore the future of *Art Documentation*. I appreciate the opportunity to have evaluated the issue of peer review in relation to *Art Documentation* and look forward to the continued evolution of the discussion as it grows to include the voices of the entire ARLIS/NA membership.

Rebecca Price

---

<sup>3</sup> This is further complicated by general confusion and inconsistency in labeling journals as peer-reviewed (Bachand and Sawallis, 40-41). R. Bachand and P. Sawallis point out that there are significant discrepancies between the major periodical directories, *Ulrich's* and *Serials Directory*, in identifying scholarly, peer-reviewed journals. Added to which, if a journal is defined as peer-reviewed, then all content from that journal is considered peer-reviewed, when that may not be the case. In addition, the peer review process is carried in considerably different ways by different journals and different communities.

### Selected Bibliography

(The literature on peer review is extensive in information science and library literature, as well as in scientific circles. There is significantly less discussion of it in the humanities literature. The following articles offer a select, few examples from the discussion.)

Bachand, Robert and Pamela Sawallis, "Accuracy in the Identification of Scholarly and Peer-Reviewed Journals and the Peer-Review Process across Disciplines," *The Serials Librarian* 45/2 (2003): 39-59.

Campanario, Juan Miguel, "Peer Review for Journals as it Stands Today – Part 1," *Science Communications* 19/3 (March 1998): 181-211.

Glogoff, Stuart, "Interviewing the Gatekeepers. A Survey of Referees of Library Journals," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* 39/6 (1988): 400-407.

Harnad, Stevan, "The Invisible Hand of Peer Review," *Exploit Interactive* 5 (April 2000) <http://www.princeton.edu/~harnad/nature2.html> (viewed Oct. 12, 2006).

Kassirer, Jerome and Edward Campion, "Peer Review: Crude and Understudied, but Indispensable," *JAMA* 272 (1994): 296-97.

Madden, A.D., "When did Peer Review Become Anonymous?" *Aslib Proceedings* 52/8 (Sept. 2000): 273-281.

Mruck, Katja and Gunter Mey, "Between Printed Past and Digital Future," *Research in Science Education* 32 (2002): 257-268.

Mulligan, A., "Is Peer Review in Crisis?," *Oral Oncology* 41 (2005): 135-141.

*Peer Review*, from Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peer\\_review](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peer_review), (viewed: Oct. 12, 2006; last edited Oct. 7, 2006) Note: extensive external links/bibliography

Richardson, John. "The Peer Review Process: Acceptances, Revisions, and Outright Rejections (1)." *Library Quarterly* 72/1 (Jan. 2002): v-xi.

Tipler, Frank J., "Refereed Journals: Do They Insure Quality or Enforce Orthodoxy?" *ISCID Archive* (June 30, 2003), [http://www.iscid.org/papers/Tipler\\_PeerReview\\_070103.pdf](http://www.iscid.org/papers/Tipler_PeerReview_070103.pdf) (viewed Oct. 24, 2006).

Tomney, Hilary and Paul Burton, "Electronic Journals: A Study of Usage and Attitudes among Academics," *Journal of Information Science* 24/6 (1998): 419-429.

Zimon, Kathy and Eileen Markson, "Art Documentation: Genesis of an Issue from Conception to Publication" *Art Documentation* 23/1 (2004): 38-42.