A new initiative for 2024: increasing peer review transparency at MHR

Michele Boiani 1 1 and Francesca E. Duncan 1 2

1 Editor-in-Chief, MHR
2 Deputy Editor, MHR

In 2024, we would like to test a new initiative that we have been hoping to integrate into our Journal for years—since the time of the interview that led to our appointments as the Editor-in-Chief and Deputy Editor of MHR.

Although the peer review system is not perfect, it is probably the best tool we have to ensure the quality of our publications and to maintain vigilance with respect to scientific integrity. MHR’s current peer review model is single-anonymized peer review. Here, the authors’ identities are known to both the editors and reviewers, while the reviewers’ identities are hidden from the authors. Other models, including double- and triple-anonymized peer review and open peer review are variously represented in the journals published by our publisher, Oxford University Press (OUP; see, for instance, Meaden and McKenna, 2021). With a transparent peer review model, any peer review process can be used with the ‘added extra’ of the reviewer and editor comments being published alongside the final article following its acceptance.

Following an ongoing public discussion of modernizing peer review to take into consideration systemic changes in the publication landscape, we think that the time has come also for MHR to join the efforts of several other journals, including those published by OUP, by introducing transparent peer review (Taphouse and Cockshull, 2022). The reasons behind the specific choices of other journals to make this change vary. They range from making a generic call for more transparency with no reference to specific events, to maintaining or restoring readers’ confidence after discovering unethical practices such as fake peer review and peer review bias. In the case of MHR, it is simply a matter of telling a more complete story. An increasing proportion of readers, including ourselves, want to know not only that peer review took place and what the outcome was, but also how and why the decision to publish an article was reached. Furthermore, transparent peer review allows us to highlight the significant contribution of our peer reviewers and associate editors (without revealing their identities) to the final version of published articles.

For all the reasons mentioned above, MHR will initiate a pilot in which a limited number—to start with—of accepted articles (following our standard (single-anonymized) peer review process) will be offered an option to be published together with the anonymized reviewers’ and associate editor’s reports (with the exception of confidential comments to the editors) and authors’ responses (for all versions of the manuscript). This will, of course, be done with the permission of authors, reviewers, and associate editor. Although we are aware that other journals give reviewers the option to reveal their identities (and we personally have no problem revealing our identity when we occasionally review for other journals), we realize that reviewers who are in the early stages of their research careers may be hesitant to do so, particularly if they have a negative opinion of a manuscript that was submitted by a senior and/or well-known author. Therefore, during the pilot, MHR will, by default, protect reviewer and associate editor anonymity.

During the pilot, the option of transparent peer review will be limited to the articles initially submitted on or after 1 January 2024 that are accepted for publication and selected as Editor’s Choice articles. Since we cannot know a priori which articles will become Editor’s Choices when they are submitted and undergo the review process, the transparent peer review pilot will be managed a posteriori: that is, the reviewers, associate editor, and authors will be asked for their permission for their reviews, comments, and responses, respectively, to be published once the manuscript has been accepted. The corresponding author will be invited to communicate with their co-authors to obtain their permission. We emphasize that this will be an option, and if all parties (authors, reviewers, and associate editor) opt in, then the reviewers’ and editor’s comments and authors’ responses will be published as supplementary information. Should this pilot be well-received, we will then consider whether to implement transparent peer review on a broader scale.

At the time of writing, the publication landscape is transforming, and we are in the midst of change. Therefore, it is difficult to predict if this pilot will be successful. For us, personally, the intention is to tell a more complete story (or very close to one—given the preserved anonymity of the reviewers and associate editor) behind a published paper.

References


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