REVIEWING THE REVIEW PROCESS

Although I had written many papers, when I became an associate editor I knew little about the review process. Certainly I knew that papers were sent out for comment, but how reviewers were chosen and whether their word was final was not clear. Now, after five years of experience, I understand the process better. However, from comments I’ve heard and from many discussions, I believe many do not. I provide here one person’s perspective on this sometimes vexing topic.

When I receive a new paper to review, my first priority is to read over the title, abstract, introduction, conclusion, and references. This “first look” gives me a good sense of the subject matter, the authors’ view of their work, how well written the paper is, and who else has been active in this field. After this, I usually take a few minutes and write down as many candidates as I can who might be willing to review the paper. My criteria for selection is simple. I try to choose two reviewers who know the field well, assuming I believe they will provide a fair and serious assessment of the paper. For the third reviewer, I like to use someone who will have a more general interest in the paper and thus a broader perspective on its subject. Next I contact the potential reviewers by e-mail or phone to see if they are willing to help. However, for many reasons, it is not uncommon to have to try four or five people in order to find two or three willing to do a review.

Unfortunately, this is seldom the end of the story. A reviewer may change their mind about doing a review or may simply take too long. Sometimes, they may exclude themselves between a first and second review. This is obviously difficult and can create substantial delays. Depending on the nature of the problem, one must either send a reminder, find a new reviewer, or live with fewer reviews.

Completed reviews usually get returned over a period of a couple of weeks to a couple of months. Though frustrating and difficult, some delays are likely inevitable. A thorough and complete review requires a substantial commitment of time and effort. In general, I find that the more difficult, complex, long, or poorly written a paper is, the slower and more demanding is the work of reviewers.

To be fair, the reviewer’s task is a complex one. In the midst of their usually busy schedules, a reviewer needs to submit themselves to another’s work and pattern of thought. Even if the paper is obscure or difficult, they need to assess whether the topic is interesting, whether the arrangement of material logical, if the discussion is suitably insightful, whether the conclusions are justified, and if the overall contribution is original. If they do their job well, they should delay passing judgment about the importance of a paper until they are sure they understand it. Of course, if every paper were original, creative, lucid, and convincing their job would be easy.

Not surprisingly—particularly because their awareness of the paper’s subject is often less complete than the authors’—reviewers sometimes miss the point. They may be locked into conventional thinking about the topic and fail to recognize and appreciate originality. Sometimes they simply don’t understand the contribution of the paper. Alternatively, they may not detect incorrect or weak arguments. However, more often than not, I find reviewers do their work well, giving frank, insightful, and constructive comments about where they feel the paper is most convincing and where it falls short.

Yet one should understand that authors may be biased when they view their own work. In fact, Williams (1990) argues forcibly that authors are systematically handicapped in assessing their own work. They are typically too close to their sub-

GUEST EDITORIAL

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indicates that this kind of approach may very well be successful.

In the end, I believe the review process often works remarkably well. Certainly, it is not easy to suggest a better way of protecting the technical community from errors and confusion while recognizing both originality and technical excellence.

APPENDIX. REFERENCE


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