

# REFEREEING -PERHAPS THERE ISN'T A CONSPIRACY AFTER ALL

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How is it that the journals of learned societies never reflect the pattern of research of their members? How is it that some of the strongest research areas in the discipline are never published there? How is it that none of the exciting work in my field is published in the journals of even the most specialized learned societies I belong to?

It does not take a conspiracy theory to explain this. It is not necessary to have evil editors and referees conspiring to publish only their own pet theories or conspiring to give RAE points to their friends.

For example, consider a journal having ten board members, with each paper submitted being refereed by one of them. One board member, while generally open-minded, will always reject papers on one particular subject Theory Q (which might be economic-man theories of quality, maternal ethics, feminism, food availability decline theories of famine, Derrida etc.) He also rejects papers attacking his own pet theory - it usually seems to be a he - on the grounds that they are obviously wrong. Papers are allocated to the board members at random for refereeing. This means that 10% of all papers submitted to the journal will go to this board member and so will be rejected out of hand if they are on Theory Q or attack his own pet theory, even if all the other referees would have rated them as excellent.

The Editorial Board then decides to attempt to raise the journal's status by having each paper refereed by three board members, and to accept them only when all three referees recommend publication. Again there is a random allocation of papers to referees, and our board member is on 30% of the panels. Now the single board member can reject 30% of the papers which are on Theory Q or which attack his pet theory. This happens even when a

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conscious attempt has been made to balance the Board with members drawn from all the main research programmes in the discipline.

In reality, though, a Board is often assembled from a group of right-thinking chaps with some influence, who nominate each other. Right-thinking means that you have no record of criticizing the other chaps' pet theories, and it may also mean that you have sound ideas on Theory Q. It is usual for most of the ten to share some of the prejudices. If only three board members reject all Theory Q and everything attacking a pet theory, and with three referees for each paper, the probability of rejection increases to 75%, assuming the referees are selected at random. If, however, all papers on Theory Q and their pet theory are sent to these three, on the grounds that they know more about these subjects than any other board members, the rejection rate rises to 100%.

Anyone writing on these subjects soon realizes that there is a very high rejection rate, and submits to other journals. The journal of the learned society no longer publishes on these topics at all. Because of this, people who are interested in them are not considered for membership of the Board when replacements are needed.

The members of the learned society pay their subscriptions and finance the journal because they want to know what is going on in their field - everything that is going on. It is the duty of the editor and the board members to provide the full range, and they accept this duty when they accept the post. It is an abuse of power and a misuse of members' money to use their power to suppress some lines of research or promote others. If they want to adopt a different stance, to reject anything they believe in their hearts to be wrong, let them start their own journal, with a title like 'Journal of Right-Thinking Economics' to warn off subscribers and authors who are not interested.

If they are editing or refereeing for a learned society, they should not just reject any paper that one referee dislikes. They should take a violent reaction as *prima facie* evidence that the paper has raised a real issue. If there is strong disagreement between referees, the paper should be published, with one referee publishing a comment (and how few referees would make the comments they do if they knew they were going to appear in print!). The

requirement is that the editor should edit, not just act as a secretary, sending out papers to referees, and accepting their verdict.

While this model shows that we do not need a conspiracy theory, conspiracy theorists will be delighted to see how easily a handful of conspirators can exercise a powerful influence in their subject.

824 words