Embracing the Golden Rule of Reviewing: A Response to the Tragedy of the Scientific Commons

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Embracing the Golden Rule of Reviewing: A Response to the Tragedy of the Scientific Commons

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Abstract:

Many papers and discussions have identified potential structural or institutional changes to address issues associated with the peer-review process in the information systems field. In this paper, I take an individual-level approach that empowers each of us to do our part to address the tragedy of the scientific commons. My answer to the tragedy of the science commons is simple in concept but challenging in application: the Golden Rule of Reviewing: “Do unto others as you would have reviewer two do unto you”.

Keywords: Review Process, Peer Review, Information Systems Field.

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Do unto others as you would have reviewer two do unto you.

—Golden Rule of Reviewing

1 Introduction

In his paper, Stafford (2018) notes that, in our profession, “everyone wants to receive a good review when they submit their own research for potential publication, but not everyone who receives a good review also wants to provide a good review when asked to serve as a jurist on someone else’s study” (2018, p. 625). As a member of the information systems (IS) community who has served in multiple roles in the publication process (i.e., editor-in-chief, senior editor, associate editor, reviewer, and author), I found the scenarios that Stafford articulates commonplace in terms of how the tragedy of the scientific commons manifests itself in the academic community.

In this rejoinder, I offer one approach to address the concerns that Stafford (2018) shares about the tragedy of the commons in the IS field. Many systematic reasons explain why we all want to receive high-quality reviews but, collectively, do not always provide them for our colleagues. I have heard and read many suggestions regarding how we can address the issues in the review process by changing our processes, altering our reward structures, and removing other institutional barriers that encourage good reviewing practices. Yet, I offer an alternative approach to address the tragedy of the commons in the review process that empowers each scholar in the information systems community to become a part of the solution: the Golden Rule.

The Golden Rule is a well-known ethical principle that many cultures around the world embrace. It has a simple premise: “do unto others as you would have them do unto you”. This simple ethical principle can also be useful in addressing the tragedy of the scientific commons. Many individuals have debated the Golden Rule’s origins, value, and interpretation; however, if we focus on the rule’s quintessential idea, it addresses some of the challenges that arise in the review process. If we simply provide authors with the types of reviews we wish to receive, then we do not have to wait for institutional changes to improve the review process in the IS field.

To understand how we might understand how to apply the Golden Rule to the review process, I first identify some of the self-interests that authors possess during the review process. Next, I share some of the self-interests that reviewers possess during the review process. Finally, I discuss why it can be challenging to embrace the Golden Rule of Reviewing but explain why this rule is important as a means to demonstrate how all IS scholars can play a role in addressing the tragedy of the scientific commons.

2 Authors’ Self-interests

To understand the “commons” in the information systems community, we need to first understand authors’ self-interests. We might assume that authors only want journals to unconditionally accept their manuscripts after they submit them. Yet, as authors, we do not choose to participate in the peer-review process to have our research and ideas accepted blindly. We adopted the peer-review process as part of our scientific community because (at some level) we believe that peer-review improves our work and establishes credibility for our research.

While we all lament the challenges associated with the peer-review system and lengthy developmental review cycles, many of us, if we are honest, have seen our work improve through the peer-review process. In my experience, the final published version of my research tends to communicate my findings more clearly, relates better to existing theory, and/or more pointedly identifies the potential for my research to impact research and practice.

I also have manuscripts that I have not submitted for peer review or I have only published only in conference proceedings due to some of the challenges associated with the peer-review process. The peer-review process can be frustrating due to the many things that can seemingly go wrong. On a few occasions, an editor will intervene to address the shortcomings that occur during the process. Yet, many scholars have virtual file folders that represent research projects that are not “worth the fight” due to the issues that are likely to arise during the review process (Ralph, 2016). These research projects are not necessarily flawed but rather projects with research that “differs” too much from the status quo. Authors fear the review process will be unnecessarily challenging because of the theory they challenge, methods
they use, or phenomena they examine. When good, interesting research remains unpublished due to problems in the peer review process, we all lose in the scientific commons.

In reflecting on the authors’ self-interests in the review process, there are four components that create a more positive experience for authors: fair reviews, timely reviews, useful reviews, and expert reviewers (see Figure 1). Authors ideally want a peer-review process with all four components; yet, as authors, we often simply appreciate if the review process involves even two or three of them.

![Figure 1. Authors’ Self-interests During the Review Process](image)

A *fair review* means that reviewers evaluate one’s research on its merit and potential contribution to the field rather than on the authors’ reputation, whether the paper maintains the status quo, or whether it uses the prescribed methods or theory expected for the research genre. A fair review does not imply that reviewers need to accept every research paper. Editors and reviewers should quickly reject papers that are unlikely to succeed in revision process, fall out of the journal’s scope, have fatal flaws in their research method, or fail to meet the standards expected that the journal expects rather than letting it spend months (or years) in the review process. If the research is relevant and interesting and the authors can address the concerns that the reviewers raise via revision, then authors should ideally have an opportunity to revise their work to address the reviewers’ concerns.

A *timely review* means that the reviewers process the manuscript in a reasonable timeframe. Timely reviews can significantly affect authors’ careers—especially those who near promotion and/or tenure decisions. As authors, we recognize that the peer-review process takes time, which a journal’s editorial structure can particularly affect. Editors need to screen papers and identify reviewers, which takes time. Reviewers need to create time in their schedule to carefully read the manuscript and provide their comments. Editors need time to reflect on reviewers’ recommendations and make a decision. As authors in the IS field, we recognize it will often take several months to receive a decision on our manuscript; however, when these processes take longer than the expected timeframe, it can create complications for authors.

A *useful review* provides feasible, relevant, constructive, and actionable feedback. If a reviewer recommends the editor reject a manuscript, then actionable feedback helps authors consider how they might address problems before submitting the manuscript to another outlet. If a reviewer recommends revise and resubmit the manuscript, then the author needs to be able to understand how to address the concerns that the reviewer recommends. Receiving vague feedback to “tighten the language” or to address the “conceptual mess” does not particularly help authors improve their work. Authors generally want to satisfy the review panel with their changes; therefore, when reviewers provide constructive advice that authors can achieve with a revision, authors have a more positive experience (i.e., because it is possible to develop an action plan to address the reviewers’ concerns) and the reviewers feel more engaged in the process (i.e., because the authors could incorporate feedback from the reviewers in the revision).

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1 For specific advice on how to write an actionable and useful review, I recommend Lee’s (1995) discussion on reviewing manuscripts.
Finally, as authors, we also would like a review panel that comprises experts in the field. Reviewers may have theoretical, the contextual, or methodological expertise. Authors can find it frustrating to receive reviews from reviewers that appear to have little knowledge of the content in the manuscript. It can be challenging to write and revise a manuscript to appeal to reviewers that do not understand or appreciate the topic, theory, or methods.

3 Reviewers’ Self-interests

Reviewers say “yes” or “no” to performing a review when called on by an editor for many reasons. They also choose to take the time to provide a “good” or high-quality review for many reasons. Figure 2 identifies four possible self-interests that can manifest themselves among reviewers as part of the review process: duty, burden, privilege, and power. Reviewers will likely have multiple self-interests during each review. Some of these self-interests can create tensions with other self-interests during the review process.

Figure 2. Reviewers’ Self-Interest during the Review Process

*Duty* represents an individual’s sense of citizenship or reciprocity during the review process. This self-interest manifests as an individual performs a review out of obligation to the scientific community. For example, for each manuscript submitted to a peer-review process, three to six individuals deal with it (i.e., two to three editors plus the review panel). One’s sense of duty or obligation to agree to review may manifest as an individual agrees to perform a certain number of reviews for each manuscript submitted for consideration at journals. Duty also arises as one considers how much time and effort to put into reviewing a manuscript. Reviewers that have received thoughtful reviews (particularly in the recent past) may feel more willing to provide thoughtful reviews for others out of a sense of duty or reciprocity.

*Burden* refers to the competing demands that all scholars have for their time. Accepting a review request creates another burden on the limited available time that one has. High-quality reviews take time, and many interests compete for our time as scholars: research goals; teaching expectations; departmental, college, or university service obligations; other professional service activities; and familial or personal needs. Accepting a request to review creates yet another burden in an already hectic schedule, which can limit the time and effort that one can devote to crafting a high-quality review for a manuscript.

*Privilege* refers to the honor of being a part of the process to identify and develop the research that builds our field. One’s sense of privilege manifests when a reviewer feels a sense of value or honor in being asked to review a manuscript. Early in my career, I experienced joy when a scholar I had cited, but did not know personally, asked me to perform a review. I was pleased when others wanted my expertise and my
knowledge to evaluate the merits of a manuscript. I was honored to provide advice to the authors about how to improve on their work. It is important to remember the privilege in being asked to perform a review. IS tends to employ incremental research; therefore, as reviewers, we shape the content that our journals publish and, thus, have an effect on future IS research.

Power refers to the influence that we have through our recommendations as reviewers about the future of a manuscript in the review process. As reviewers, we might be asked to review work that challenges our current or prior research. Power can manifest in the review process when reviewers seek to minimize or diminish research that challenges their own legacy. We can also use our power as reviewers to promote, develop, or encourage research that can positively impact our field. The fact that reviewers and editors shape the future of the IS field in what they accept for publication represents not only a privilege but also a source of power. The reviewer’s use of power during the review process can discourage or encourage innovation and interesting ideas in our research community.

4 Reconciling Self-interests to Address the Tragedy of the Scientific Commons

Given that authors’ self-interests do not always align with the reviewers’ self-interests, addressing the tragedy of the scientific commons (Stafford, 2018) involves challenges. Even with the best of intentions, “do unto others as you would have reviewer two do unto you” is not always a feasible outcome. Figure 3 demonstrates how reviewers’ self-interests can create pressures that impact the process of creating a review that meets the authors’ needs. While not every review may fully meet the Golden Rule of Reviewing, striving for this goal can guide reviewers as they engage in the review process.

Figure 3. The Challenges in Resolving Tragedy of the Scientific Commons

Stafford (2018) identifies three scholars to demonstrate the challenges of the scientific commons: A, B, and Z. A refers to the junior researcher who quickly says “yes” when asked to review even with significant service or other burdens. B refers to the more established scholar who might be quick to say “no” or can only complete the review if given a lengthy extension. Z refers to a scholar asked to perform a review outside of Z’s field, which means that, in completing the review, Z would contribute to a field that will not likely reciprocate the effort.

Candidly, I have been each of the scholars that Stafford (2018) identifies. I have been Z: I have completed reviews for journals or conferences outside of my field. When researchers outside the IS field have needed my expertise, I have contributed to the greater scholarly community as a sense of duty to the...
academy (beyond my field). I also have accepted the request to review in scenario Z because I recognize
the privilege of the request. Someone outside of my field recognizes me as an expert and values my
opinion; therefore, I choose to accept the privilege of performing the review (particularly when I have fewer
burdens on my time when someone makes the request). As reviewer Z, there are challenges in providing
what the author needs because I may not be an expert in the context but only in a narrow aspect of the
study (e.g., the methodology or theory). It can also be more challenging to provide a useful and/or fair
review without fully understanding the standards of a particular field—particularly if the field ventures
further beyond related business fields.

I have also been A. I have been the young researcher willing to take on yet another review even when I
had little time available. As the burden of professional service increases due to additional requests to
review manuscripts and perform service to the community, it becomes more challenging to find the time to
craft a fair, useful, and timely review. "Every 'yes' is a 'no'"—that is, each time one agrees to a complete a
review, one has less time for one's research, teaching, other service commitments, and one's personal life
and needs. Acknowledging the privilege of being asked to review or accommodating one's sense of duty
to review manuscripts when one already has a high service burden means that one has to sacrifice
something in one's career or personal life to complete the review.

Finally, I have also been B. Most reviewers will have many obligations that compete for their available
time, and I am not exempt. At times, I choose not to complete a review due to overwhelming commitments
or a need to set boundaries in professional service, such as when my professional or personal burdens
are too great and I know I will not be able to provide authors' with a timely review. I may read an abstract
and turn down a review request because I fear that I cannot offer a fair review or expert or useful review to
authors. These few guidelines represent some reasons that affect my choice to accept or decline a
request for review.

In other scenarios, I have also been a reviewer that accepts a request to review because I believe that I
can meet the authors' self-interests. Yet, I may discover that I am unable to meet the authors' needs.
Unfortunately, I have been late submitting reviews or have asked for more time to complete a review due
to overwhelming burdens on time. I have been a member of a review panel that has had less expertise on
the context, theory, or method than other potential reviewers. I have also had moments when writing a
review in which I realized I had a bias that might affect my fairness to the authors. Particularly, for those
violations of fairness and usefulness or if I am not an expert reviewer in the theory, context, or method, I
identify these concerns privately to the editors. I do try to honor the Golden Rule of Reviewing by
providing reviews to my colleagues that I want to receive, but even this simple rule can be challenging in
application.

We will always have competing self-interests as authors and reviewers. Yet, if we recognize our self-
interests as authors and acknowledge our self-interests as reviewers, we can improve on the review
process in the IS field through applying the Golden Rule of Reviewing.

5 Concluding Thoughts

The Golden Rule of Reviewing does not necessarily address every problem in the review process itself.
We will still struggle as authors through the peer-review process, particularly when we have
developmental review cycles that can take years to complete. We will still have challenges as editors in
finding expert reviewers that provide timely, fair, and useful reviews. We can address these issues in other
ways, but they require more institutional-level changes at our journals and in our field (e.g., livari, 2016).
Any solution to address issues in the review process have their own drawbacks. In this paper, I consider
what each of us can do to make a difference in the review process. We do not have to be powerless
victims of the scientific commons. We can each be empowered to address some of the problems that
Stafford (2018) identifies.

The Golden Rule of Reviewing also only works if we apply it as authors as well. If we send unfinished or
poorly crafted papers into the review process, we waste our precious resources in the scientific commons.
Authors that choose to send early versions of manuscripts for review to receive initial feedback waste
editors’ and reviewers’ time and effort. Submitting revisions that ignores the reviewers’ concern is also a

2 A faculty member at an MIS camp I attended at the Americas Conference on Information Systems shared this wisdom with me
years ago. Unfortunately, I do not remember which mentor shared this advice to attribute this phrase to them. It has been a useful
framing to understand how each commitment affects individual scholars.
poor use of the commons. We can avoid these problems by again treating others how we want to be treated. If we want to review good papers, we have to submit good papers as authors\textsuperscript{3}.

I acknowledge that this short rejoinder has several limitations. Certainly, more self-interests for both authors and reviewers than what I discuss in this paper exist. More nuances to how each of the self-interests manifests beyond what I shared in this rejoinder also exist. I could have expanded the discussion of each self-interest indefinitely. Yet, if readers find themselves challenging the self-interests I identify for authors or if they find that they have different self-interests when they review manuscripts, then I have achieved my goal. If we all begin reflecting on the qualities of a “good” or a high-quality review and the issues that keep us from providing those reviews, then we are more likely to provide high-quality reviews for our colleagues. I also note that I could have written a different paper directed to editors (e.g., associate editors, senior editors, and editors-in-chief). Editors play an important role in shaping the review process; however, I purposefully chose not to take this approach. Nearly everyone reading this paper has been, is, or will be a reviewer, but not everyone has, does, or will hold an editorial position. We do not have to wait for someone else to improve the review process: we each have an opportunity to improve the review process for ourselves and our colleagues.

I recognize that scholars do not plan to write a “bad” or poor-quality review. I also recognize that many scholars in our community want to serve as expert reviewers to provide fair, timely, and useful reviews but editors do not ask them to review. Editors may not know these expert reviewers for various reasons. If you are underused as an expert reviewer or struggle to provide fair, timely, and useful reviews and want to play a larger role in addressing the tragedy of the scientific commons, then I offer some practical suggestions. First, many of the major conferences of the Association for Information Systems have workshops for reviewing. If you are not sure how to write a high-quality review, if you want to improve your reviewing skills, or if you want to be noticed for having an interest in writing strong reviews, attend one of these reviewing workshops. It is a chance to meet editors that can provide advice on how to write high-quality reviews and allow others to identify you as a person interested and willing to perform reviews. If you cannot attend one of the larger AIS conferences, you might reach out to your local AIS chapter if they hold a conference. You could propose a panel or workshop on the topic of reviewing. Finally, if you feel you the IS community underuses you as a reviewer, I suggest that you reach out to those that are senior editors and/or associate editors at the journals you tend to read and/or those journals in which you aspire to publish. Identify associate or senior editors that have similar research interests. Send an email expressing your interest in reviewing. Identify that you would like to have more experience in reviewing for that journal and share your research interests and your areas of expertise with the editor. Personally, I welcome these types of emails when I receive them because I can then expand my reviewer network with scholars that are eager to contribute to the academic community\textsuperscript{4}.

The tragedy of the scientific commons is not easily solved. We can challenge the current institutional structures and wait for them to change to improve the review process. Yet, in the meantime, I encourage each of us to do our part as individuals to lessen the tragedy of the scientific commons through the Golden Rule of Reviewing.

\textsuperscript{3} Recker (2016) shares some excellent points about the responsibility of authors and their role associated with some of the challenges that arise during the peer-review process.

\textsuperscript{4} I also have had individuals approach me at conferences offering to review. This strategy is useful if you want to engage in reviewing; however, I would also recommend following up with the editor over email to ensure that the editor has your contact information and your reviewing interests.
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Stacie Petter, PhD, is an Associate Professor of Information Systems in Hankamer School of Business at Baylor University. She earned her PhD in Computer Information Systems from Georgia State University with an MBA from Georgia State University and a BS from Berry College. Her primary research examines issues associated with software project management, impacts of information systems, and research methods. Her work has appeared in journals, including MIS Quarterly, Journal of Management Information Systems, Journal of the Association for Information Systems, among others. She has served as an Associate Editor at MIS Quarterly and Information Systems Journal. She currently serves as Editor-in-Chief of The Data Base for Advances in Information Systems, Senior Editor for AIS Transactions on Replication Research, and Editorial Review Board member for the Journal of the Association for Information Systems. She is the Association for Information Systems’ REGION 1 representative and is chair of the Americas Conference for Information Systems Executive Committee.