Peer Review and Interface

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Peer Review and Interface

Editorial by Jeffrey Barlow

Our Feature article in this issue of Interface is James Kundart, Yu-Chi Tai, John R. Hayes, and James Sheedy, “Word Recognition and the Accommodative Response to Desktop Versus Handheld Video Displays (Handheld Study #2)"

We are pleased to publish it as a fully peer-reviewed submission. We write here to explain the significance of peer review, particularly for an e-journal such as ours.

The problem of electronic materials distributed over the Internet is their relative authority and reliability. Anybody can publish on the Internet and make whatever claims they wish for the reliability of their materials and for their own authority, within the rather broad limits of criminal laws such as those affecting slander and egregious misrepresentations.

Materials distributed in classical paper journals do not face the same problems. The reader usually has a good notion of the reliability of the materials, because the journals or newspapers themselves have established reputations.

If journals wish to be considered scholarly or professional, they must follow long-established procedures for peer review. Usually it is expected that submissions will be stripped, inasmuch as possible, of all hints of who it is who had authored them, then sent out to a number of review editors who are professionally qualified in fields identical to, or at least close to those of the author. The author, in turn, should never learn whom it was who either supported or condemned his or her submission, so that it was or was not published.

This system usually works quite smoothly, although most scholars can usually and easily be induced to rave on about great injustices, they personally have suffered. I, for example, once submitted a piece to— excuse me, I was momentarily overcome by a flashback there!

At Interface, we publish articles in a variety of niches, some more weighty than others. We assure reliability by contracting with highly competent professionals in their field, but we
encourage them to write quickly (and cheaply!), and to aim for a broad audience.

Because we believe very strongly that the quality of materials on the Internet must be improved and readers much better prepared to use them properly, we have devised a system for communicating the relative authority of our pieces. Usually, unless the piece is obviously little more than an announcement or otherwise relatively trivial, we put a seal signaling authority levels upon it [1]. We usually aim for a minimal authority level of “4” which means the piece ultimately can be read with confidence, but it may well be that there are better materials to be found on these same topics.

Our student authors, often Berglund Student Fellows who have worked on a given piece for an extended period, should receive levels of “3” [2].

However, authors sometimes wish for a full peer-review process because they intend the piece to be used in some professional process requiring such reviews, as is the case with our Feature. Accordingly, it receives an authority level of “5” indicating it was peer reviewed [3].

We think that peer review is often over-stressed and that it can have many problems. Certainly it sometimes delays publication for a considerable period. At the Berglund Center we also publish several scholarly peer-reviewed journals, such as E-AsPac and formerly, The Journal of the Association for History and Computing [4], now published at the University of Michigan, and the time lag from submission to publication is often many months as an article travels back and forth between editors and reviewers. In the pre-digital days, such a process could take years.

There are, some think, better ways of establishing quality than by the traditional scholarly path, but it is well established and for now we must live with it. Hopefully, electronic journals will eventually establish their own procedures. For now, when we award a Berglund level 5 seal to an article, as we did for the Feature, we follow established procedures.

**Endnotes**


[2] Level 3 materials are often the result of research projects done by inexperienced authors, but guided by experienced ones. These might include extensive undergraduate research projects. They have the following characteristics:

- Level 3 materials should be free from errors of fact. If some of their conclusions are controversial ones, these should be held by at least some authorities in the field of study.
- Level 3 materials should depend to a considerable extent upon published and easily available materials so that readers can themselves explore the topic further with some confidence.
- The basis of conclusions drawn in level 3 materials should be clear and rooted in research, not in mere opinion or prejudice.
- Level 3 authors should be known, and can be contacted to discuss their works.
- The works are dated as to time of origin and any updates that occurred.
- Limitations of level 3 materials: Level 3 materials may provide an adequate beginning for serious research, but should not be the sole foundation of such research. They might well provide a good orientation to the topic and suggest additional research paths, but this is their major strength.

For source see: http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/submissions/authoritylevel.php

[3] Level 5 materials have to pass a number of tests and represent the highest possible level of trust or authority. They are equivalent to materials published in paper form by scholarly journals or presses. They could be placed in a library and should prove useful for some length of time. They have the following characteristics, but no piece, of course, will necessarily have all of them:

- Materials certified as Authority Level 5 have been reviewed by scholars in the appropriate field following practices long utilized in scholarly journals and other refereed publications. That is, they have been read closely by one or more established professionals comfortable with the topic area of the piece. The review process was “double-blind.” That is, neither the authors nor the reviewers were aware of each other’s identities.
- In the judgments of these readers, the piece makes a contribution to the topic being discussed; that is, they are not merely a restatement of existing scholarly opinions.
- The materials have both citations and bibliographies sufficient to permit readers to retrace the author’s research steps so as to form their own opinion as to the strength and weaknesses of the pieces when measured against the set of evidence on which they were constructed.
- The author should discuss methodology as well as evidence: how do they know what they know?
- The articles show an awareness of the current state of the topic by referencing or discussing recent scholarship in both important books and articles. The author should probably indicate areas where there are differences of opinion among authorities.
- The author of the piece is known, can be contacted to discuss or defend his or her positions, and themselves have some specialized education, training, or experience relative to their topic.
- The piece is well written and organized and has a minimum of spelling, grammatical or formatting errors, showing the qualities of mind necessary to good research, thought, and writing.
- Such publications would usually include research done in the language(s) of the subject field as appropriate.
- Limitations of Level 5 materials: Despite these strict standards, even the best research and writing has areas of relative weakness, and scholars in the field will often disagree about each others’ positions. The more “cutting edge” a piece, the more likely it is to be controversial. For the average reader, however, these controversies are likely to be unimportant ones.
For source of the above see: http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/submissions/authoritylevel.php

[4] For E-AsPac see: http://mcel.pacificu.edu/easpac/ For the JAHC see: http://quod.lib.umich.edu/j/jahc/

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