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2 **Publishing more than reviewing? Some ethical musings on the sustainability of the peer**
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4 **review process**
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11 **Abstract**
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13 Based on our editorial experience, and acknowledging the regular editor grievances about
14 reviewer disengagement at professional meeting and conferences, in this essay, we argue that
15 the review system is in need of significant repair because hyper competition and individual
16 incentives (like reduced teaching loads or publication bonuses) are eroding the willingness of
17 individuals to engage in the collective enterprise of peer-reviewing each others' work on a
18 *quid pro quo* basis. In response to this, we ask (i) *why is it unethical for potential reviewers*
19 *to disengage from the peer-review process?* and (ii) *what are the implications for our*
20 *profession if colleagues publish more than they review?* Designed as a political intervention
21 in response to reviewer *disengagement*, we aim to 'politicize' the review process and its
22 consequences for the sustainability of the scholarly community. We hope that this essay can
23 help change attitude and behaviour for more reviewer engagement in organisational theory.
24 Failing that, we also offer a call to action for more unorthodox approaches to reverse the
25 development of reviewer disengagement.
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31 **Keywords:** Community, Ethics, Individualism, Politics, Reviewing
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Introduction

Dear XXXX¹

Sorry I am buried right now. My projects are coming due over the next few weeks and I am almost constantly reading and commenting on them now.

Dear XXXX

Sorry, I have already done too many reviews this year.

We received these emails from senior scholars on sending a ‘personalized’ journal review invitation to her/him. In the first case, this was following the email sender’s request for feedback - generously provided - on a potential journal submission, and in the second case, following the sender’s accepted publication in a journal. We venture a guess that many colleagues with editorial experience in organization theory or management studies regularly receive emails of this kind - emails indicative of prioritizing one’s own research agenda rather than contributing to and sustaining the community through the provision of peer review (see e.g., Treviño, 2008; Gallagher, 2013).

In the essay, we propose the thesis that the review system is in need of significant repair - not only because of frailties concerning human judgement or the exploitation of academics (Jordan, 2020; see also Macdonald and Kam, 2011), but because hyper competition (Edwards and Roy, 2016) and *individual* incentives (e.g., reduced teaching loads or publication bonuses or reduced teaching loads when hitting ‘A’ publications, see Aguinis et al., 2020) are eroding the willingness of individuals to engage in the collective enterprise of peer-reviewing each others’ work on a *quid pro quo* basis (Jordan, 2020). By sharp contrast, those who entertain the ‘give-and-take-attitude’ and generously provide feedback to authors have their writing time reduced. That is, to the extent that they display prosocial and collegial behaviour (see e.g., Brewis, 2018) and agree to review for colleagues, to that extent their writing time is reduced and, consequently, they face the prospect of lagging behind in

¹ The names have been omitted here for the sake of blind review.

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2 terms of research outputs that carry currency in modern academia (Willmott, 2011; Butler
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4 and Spoelstra, 2012).
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6 This development prompts us to ask two closely related questions that we believe imply
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8 significant ethical connotations. First, *why is it unethical for potential reviewers to disengage*
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10 *from the peer-review process?* Second, and relatedly, *what are the implications for our*
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12 *profession if colleagues publish more than they review?* We consider this essay as a political
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14 intervention (Gabriel, 2016) to the mis-developments that are afoot in terms of reviewer
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16 disengagement. Specifically, we paraphrase Chelli and Cunliffe's (2020) notion of
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18 "politicization of knowledge and its consequences for conducting research" to the
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20 'politicization of the review process' and its consequences for the sustainability of the
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22 scholarly community. Given the ethical valence encapsulated in the two questions that guide
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24 our essay, this step is, we believe, long overdue and in need for a perhaps provocative
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26 reckoning with the status quo. It is long overdue because, with few exceptions (Treviño,
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28 2008), a great deal of research articles in management studies (DeSimone et al., 2020;
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30 Ragins, 2017) and ethics journals (Borkowski and Welsh, 1998) continues to focus on the
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32 'how to review' submissions. Combined with that fact that in some disciplines, 20 per cent of
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34 the researchers perform 69 to 94 per cent of the reviews (Kovanis et al., 2016), the former
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36 point justifies a provocative reckoning with the status quo *now* to highlight the political
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38 dimensions of reviewer *disengagements*, or the implications of reviewers refusing to
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40 participate in the process. While we recognise that there are personal and professional
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42 circumstances that can entail that not every review invitation is positively responded to, our
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44 essay is aimed at those reviewers who decline and "provide no reason at all", those that
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46 "simply don't respond" and, worse still, those who "don't review, period", even though some
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48 of them "are among the most well-known and distinguished in the Academy" (Treviño, 2008:
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2 In what follows, we develop two ethical critiques in more detail as part of the concern
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4 about increased reviewer disengagement. First, from an ethical perspective, the uneven
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6 distribution of reviewer workloads - that is, when a small number of reviewers review the
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8 major bulk of submissions – suggests a violation of principles concerning social justice. This
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10 has been defined as “a state of affairs . . . in which (a) benefits and burdens in society are
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12 dispersed in accordance with some allocation principle . . . ; (b) procedures, norms, and rules
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14 that govern political and other forms of decision making preserve the basic rights, liberties,
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16 and entitlements of individuals and groups; and (c) human beings . . . are treated with dignity
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18 and respect not only by authorities but also by other . . . fellow citizens” (Jost and Kay, 2010:
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20 1122). A social justice perspective is entirely opportune in our essay as it represents an
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22 antidote, *inter alia*, to arbitrary or unnecessary suffering (Jost and Kay, 2010). Suffering here
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24 is implied to concern both those authors whose work struggles to be reviewed, and those few
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26 reviewers who agree to review the major volume of submissions. For the latter, it enhances
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28 the possibility of disparities in terms of career progressions, such that some colleagues (cf.
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30 first introductory quote) can rapidly progress their careers on the back of a ‘never-give-only-
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32 take-attitude’.

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39 The second point we wish to highlight here is that a limited pool of reviewers (i.e., the
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41 small volume of reviewers who do most of the reviewing most of the time) implies, by
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43 necessity, that the full possible range of expertise that theoretically exists is practically not
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45 available (Jordan, 2020). This point alerts us to the possibility that said limited expertise is
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47 less capable to detect a range of ‘bugs’ of a theoretical, empirical, methodological, or
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49 analytical kind in the submissions that are being reviewed². If these bugs remain undetected
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51 and yield unreliable research, than the prospect of practise at work being informed by such
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57 ² Of note, we are not suggesting that there is an ethical imperative on journals to ensure the best reviewers are
58 used to assess submissions. That may be theoretically laudable but practically often not feasible. Instead, we
59 propose to think of the reviewer community like the *polis* in ancient Athens, which is characterised by two
60 underlying principles of any society, namely, mutual needs and differences in aptitude as per Plato’ *The Republic*.

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2 research raises the risk of harm for individuals and organizations (Lindebaum, 2013).
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4 Likewise, a limited pool of reviewers can entail (too) much influence in their part in deciding
5 what is ‘good and relevant research’. That is, when a small number of reviewers possesses
6 disproportionate influence on what gets published vis-à-vis the total number of theoretically
7 available reviewers.
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13 Below we turn now to elaborating in more details on the two questions that guide our
14 essay. This is followed by casting a look into the future with a view to propose ways to
15 counter the growing problem of reviewer disengagement.
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22 **Why is it unethical for potential reviewers to disengage from the peer-review process?**

23 With reference to the possible suffering that can occur when social justice principles are
24 violated, who is it that actually suffers as a result of reviewer disengagement? We count our
25 colleagues, the authors, among them, the various communities of researchers than benefit
26 from the publication of new studies to inform their own work, and of course, individuals and
27 organizations whose problems can be resolved through research³. Given that the COVID 19
28 pandemic only accelerates and enhances the pressures on academics who have to manage
29 increased workload as well as their responsibility as reviewers, it is easy to offer the excuse
30 ‘I’m too busy to review’. We reiterate that reviewers can have legitimate reasons both
31 personally and professionally to sometimes (but not persistently) decline invitations.
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45 However, as everyone is busy, is it appropriate to simply focus on ourselves *all the time* to
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50 ³ Trevino (2008) includes academic journals too, but we are not inclined to consider them in this essay, because
51 their business model thrives on exploitation of academics. In fact, we object to the business model of large
52 academic publishers, some of which enjoy an operating profit margin of 36% and more (Economist, 2011).
53 Recall that the provision of academic labor – with our salaries being paid by universities – yields a product (i.e.,
54 the published article) that, in order to be accessed, requires universities and other institutions to pay a
55 subscription fee. This is double travesty in perfection; universities pay our salary for the work we perform
56 (including peer review), and academic publishers then charge universities to access their journals. We cannot
57 think of another business branch where one party pays for the production of a product or service and then has to
58 pay again to enjoy said product or service. Despite the distinctly unethical connotation of such practise, we need
59 to relegate a deeper engagement with this issue to a future project – it is outside the scope of this essay. We are
60 heartened, however, that the journals *M@n@gement* and *Ephemeria* are open access journals not owned by large
publishers.

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2 safeguard our time against the incursion of review invitations? In this regard, Trevino (2008)
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4 notes that if we “widen the lens to take consequences to others into account”, then the
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6 “decision to review is quite straightforward” (p. 9). She continues argue – and we fully
7
8 concur – that “if we want others to provide quality reviews of our work, we should be willing
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10 to do the same for them” (p. 9). Taking into account the presence of others who are affected
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12 by and through our (in)actions raises also the moral dimension of the review process.
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14 Morality inherently implies a concern for others (Solomon, 1993)⁴, which contrast with the
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16 idea of moral disengagement, defined as the “process of cognitive restructuring that allows
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18 individuals to disassociate with their internal moral standards and behave unethically without
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20 feeling distress (Newman et al., 2020: 535). We see the notion of reviewer disengagement in
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22 this light too due to the suffering it inflicts on authors and reviewers.
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28 In relation to the second ethical point that a limited pool of reviewer expertise can
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30 diminish the quality of research and hence potentially can cause harm at work, we agree that
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32 technical clarifications on how to review certain kinds of submissions can be valuable (see
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34 e.g., DeSimone et al., 2020). However, the fact remains that not detecting those ‘bugs’ of a
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36 theoretical, empirical, methodological, or analytical kind in the first place poses a
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38 fundamental challenge to our purpose to advance and accumulate knowledge with a view to
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40 address important human needs (Suddaby, 2014; Tsui, 2016). But not only that; if we take a
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42 step back and entertain for a moment the question what happens if these ‘bugs’ are not
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44 detected in the peer review process (due to lack of broader expertise), then we are confronted
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46 with the ethical fallout of limited expertise having been brought to bear onto the review
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48 process. That is, when, for instance, empirical studies are treated as ‘valid’ when in fact
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56 ⁴ Durkheim once eloquently summarised this point as follows: “It is impossible for men to live together and be
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58 in regular contact with one another without their acquiring some feeling for the totality which they constitute
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60 through having united together, without their becoming attached to it, concerning themselves with its interests
and taking it into account in their behavior. And this attachment to something that transcends the individual, this
subordination of the particular to the general interest, is the very wellspring of all moral activity” (1893/2014:
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2 serious doubts about their validity is justified. A relevant example is a recent extended post-
3 publication commentary (Prochilo et al., 2019) on a range of so-called ‘seminal’ studies on
4 organizational neuroscience (Waldman et al., 2011; Waldman et al., 2017). Prochilo and
5 colleagues (2019) demonstrated in these studies a lack of transparency for findings to be
6 clearly understood, evaluated, or replicated – and the misuse of inferential tests that lead to
7 misleading conclusions. Against the backdrop of mounting concern amongst neuroscientists
8 themselves about the validity of neuroscientific data (Thibault and Raz, 2017; Button et al.,
9 2013), Button and colleagues (2013) caution about the “ethical dimensions” of “unreliable
10 research [which] is inefficient and wasteful” (p. 365). The potential damage that can be done
11 on the back of unreliable research is well-documented (Lindebaum et al., 2018). Lastly, we
12 cannot help but think about the sustained wave of article retractions in leading management
13 and leadership journals in the previous decade, where post-publication scrutiny ascertained
14 errors in the statistical analysis which then undermined the conclusions drawn from these
15 projects (Atwater et al., 2014; Spoelstra et al., 2016).

36 **What are implications for our profession if colleagues publish more than they review?**

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38 The struggles that we and many other editors (Driggers, 2015; Treviño, 2008) experience in
39 enlisting the support of reviewers signifies, for us, a shift from concerns of others to more
40 self-interested attitudes and behaviours that threaten to undermine the function of the peer-
41 review process. It is here that the ethical becomes very functional or practical. We consider
42 the function of peer-review to be that broadly of quality control check – as already indicated
43 before - where peer review ensures that scientific conventions in the production of reliable
44 and trustworthy knowledge are complied with. But fulfilling that function comes under
45 pressure when too many academics disengage from the review process. That is, since
46 functions “refer to the history of a behaviour, trait, or system, as well as *its regular*
47 *consequences that benefit the organism*, or . . . the system in which the trait, behaviour, or
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2 system is contained” (Keltner & Gross, 1999, pp. 469, italics added), self-interested
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4 behaviour is antithetical to the idea of regular consequences that benefit our scholarly
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6 community when we support our colleagues and communities through peer review. Taking
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8 into account our own experiences, and the many published commentaries that sometimes feel
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10 like a cry for help from editors so that reviewers please engage more, we wonder about the
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12 cracks in the system – both their depths and width. We are reminded of Merton (1968), who
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14 once observed that “when *the net balance of the aggregated of consequences* of an existing
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16 social structure is clearly dysfunctional, there develops a strong and insistent pressure for
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18 change. It is possible . . . that beyond a given point, this pressure will inevitable result in
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20 more or less predetermined directions for social change” (p. 94, italics in original). If we
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22 consider previous editorials (Treviño, 2008) and recent studies on reviewer (dis)engagement
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24 (Kovanis et al., 2016) as (at least) emerging proof that review system is becoming
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26 problematic (because too few reviewers undertake too much of the review volume), then the
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28 need for change may be right here and right now.
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36 **Looking ahead and call for action**

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38 In our essay, we expressly delineated our arguments in terms of who they seek to address –
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40 *not* the reviewers who regularly review, *not* the ones who on occasion have to decline
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42 because of rival commitment (both private and professional), *but* those scholars, especially
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44 senior ones, who fail to have reasonable justifications for declining review invitations, those
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46 who do not respond at all to review invitations, or those who simply do not review at all to
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48 ensure their immediate self-interest of publishing is not jeopardised (see first opening quote).
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52 By asking two closely entwined questions around the ethics of reviewer disengagement
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54 and the practical implications that follow from this for our task to advance science with a
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56 view to address human needs (in the context of organizational theory and beyond), we aimed
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58 to shine a light on the politicization of the review process and its consequences for the
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1 sustainability of the scholarly community. Said politicization of the review process is called
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3 for in response to reviewer disengagement because of two reasons. First, there is the violation
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5 of principles around social justice, which can entail arbitrary or unnecessary suffering (Jost
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7 and Kay, 2010). As outlined, suffering here concerns both those authors whose work
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9 struggles to be reviewed, and those few reviewers who agree to review the major volume of
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11 submissions (and thereby have less time at hand to advance their own writing). Second, we
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13 undermine our own legitimacy as social scientists and as a profession when a shrinking
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15 reviewer pool is less likely to detect cases of unreliable research. In this day and age, when
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17 populist politicians and conspiracy theorists only too eagerly proliferate their ‘alternative
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19 news and facts’, any report about ‘unreliable’ research only seems to provide ammunition to
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21 them for decrying science and at the same time imposing their preferred version of reality. In
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23 addition, there is always a risk that a small reviewer pool bears excessive influence on what
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25 gets published.
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32 So what can be done? Should journals remunerate reviewers for their work? We
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34 respond in the negative here, because classic psychological research confirms that extrinsic
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36 motivation (i.e., contingent rewards, like financial incentives for review) often reduce and
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38 replace intrinsic motivation, where one desires to perform because of personal motives and
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40 interests (Deci et al., 1999). This well-established finding in psychological studies - where
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42 extrinsic incentives ‘crowd out’ intrinsic motivation - has been observed in a variety of fields,
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44 such as the provision of public goods and volunteering (Frey and Jegen, 2001) and academia
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46 itself (Gabriel, 2019). A controversial result is that individuals can feel alienated from their
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48 work when they perceive it is controlled by external incentives (Frey and Jegen, 2001).
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50 Instead, here are some, perhaps more unorthodox, musings about how to help improve the
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52 situation.
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57 First, especially senior scholars need to stop setting the wrong example in relation to
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59 what Harley (2019) refers to as the ‘heroic’ publishing machine. If we follow Harley’s (2019)
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2 observation about the countless times he has seen senior scholars boasting about their
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4 publication track record at conferences and keynote speeches, and whenever these displays
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6 are internalised as exemplary and inspiring behaviour by junior colleagues and graduate
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8 students, then the community may already have lost valuable colleague for the cause of self-
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10 interested pursuits of publications rather than the collective effort to help develop the
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12 scholarship of colleagues through peer review. That, to reconnect with the previous
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14 discussion on functions of the review system, may already contribute to the functional
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16 consequences being superseded with dysfunctional ones over time. Therefore, to reverse this
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18 development, senior scholars should start setting the *right* example in their engagements with
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20 student and junior colleagues within their institutions and at professional meetings and
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22 conferences. That is, to promote more prominently the idea that participating in the review
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24 process is a way to acquaint oneself with future research, to learn about the publishing
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26 process by interacting with authors, editors and other reviewers, and to influence the
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28 spectrum of what is to be considered good and relevant research.
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34 Second, while we hope that the arguments presented here provide some food for
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36 thought, some introspective ammunition if you will, for behavioural changes to occur, in the
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38 absence of changes in the foreseeable future, there may be a need to be shift gears and
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40 consider new ways of 'reviewer persuasion'. For instance, rather than merely whispering
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42 discontent informally at professional meetings and conferences about reviewer
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44 disengagement in future, how about journals stop accepting submissions from colleagues
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46 who have declined three and more review invitations in the span of one year, or that two
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48 reviews create a score for one submission per year for a given journal. Of course, we believe
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50 that it may not be advisable to consider this proposal as a universal law. It is self-evident that
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52 judgement and discretion need to be applied in individual cases when reviewers draw the
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54 journals' attention to their personal circumstances. But we venture a guess that purely self-
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56 interested behaviour is likely to decline over time when we understand better that our own
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2 fates are intimately intertwined with those of others. And if all else fails, then disincentives, in
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4 the form suggested above, may become a last resort to counter reviewer disengagement.
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6 In sum, we argue that the combination of senior scholars setting the right kind of
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8 example, and journals introducing a mechanism that ensures a healthy review/submission
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10 ratio can induce attitudinal and behavioural changes toward greater reviewer engagement. No
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12 community can be built and sustained on the back of the type of individualism that shines
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14 through in the introductory quotes, or indeed by shifting the entire load to a small number of
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16 individuals. So next time the invitation arrives to a review a paper, we should ‘think
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18 twice’(Driggers, 2015) before we decline it. There is, we should never forget, a person
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20 behind the manuscript ID who invested enormous amounts of time and energy in writing this
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22 article, a colleague that may have just submitted her/his first paper, a person whose career
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24 and livelihood depends on getting a paper accepted sooner rather than later⁵, or a person who
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26 has already reviewed six manuscripts this year in support of other colleagues’ scholarship.
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28 Think also about the risk that a flawed piece of research may slip into publication without our
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30 broader expertise have been applied to it, and that that flawed piece of research actually does
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32 harm in the context of organizational practise. None of that is desirable if we care about our
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34 profession and our colleagues. What will you do differently in future?
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59 ⁵ Of course, that in itself is a poor reason to provide a favourable review, but it is worth keeping that in mind in
60 terms of tone of the review and how developmental a roadmap for the improvement of the submission that
review is.

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