

Scientific Reviewing — A Moral Responsibility

Science is the foundation of technology that drives much of the modern economy and the well-being of nations and their citizens. The second half of the 20th century and, in particular, the first decade of the 21st century has seen a near-exponential growth in the sciences worldwide. This expansion in turn has resulted in a tremendous increase in scientific publishing. Advances in science depend upon, among many factors, the efficient dissemination of reliable, reproducible results. A critical and essential component of scientific publishing is careful, scholarly peer review.

In a paper published in *The American Sociologist* in 1970,¹ Hyman Rodman wrote of the moral responsibility of journal editors and referees to provide authors of manuscripts with prompt review of their contributions. Over 40 years later, we still have a problem. Despite tremendous advances in electronic communication and publishing tools, there can still be bottlenecks in the process from receipt of a manuscript in the Editor-in-Chief's office and its publication online. As editors, we realize this moral responsibility and, although we are far from perfect in this regard, make every effort to move the refereeing process along at a reasonable pace. The word "reasonable" will vary with the nature of the contribution, with the most scholarly, well-executed, exciting, creative, and broadly appealing papers often being accepted quickly while those demanding further attention by the authors to satisfy the reasonable demands of the reviewers take longer to appear online. The process of improvement that accompanies manuscripts in the latter category more than justifies the extra time that it takes to publish them.

The purpose of this Editorial is to draw attention to an issue raised at a recent meeting of Associate Editors, namely, the moral responsibilities of our referees. We greatly value the dedicated service of our reviewers and are pleased that refereeing for the *Journal of the American Chemical Society* has its own positive features; junior scientists, especially from abroad, often write us to volunteer their services. But the issue is the small but not insignificant minority of scientists who, when we invite them to review, either do not answer at all or accept and then provide no report at all, or provide one that is so late that it is of no value. The tendency of some high profile chemists to refuse on the grounds that they are too busy, an excuse used by the reviewer community and referred to in the Rodman article in 1970, is a further abrogation of the moral responsibility to serve as a referee. Although we appreciate that the unpaid peer review of manuscripts for *JACS* or any other journal is a form of service, long expected of our community, failure to respond to an invitation to review in a timely fashion (or at all) threatens the entire system of scholarly research activity, of which publication is the end result.

To address the issue of responsible refereeing, we request that members of the chemistry community, when invited by one of our Associate Editors to review a manuscript, adhere to the following simple guidelines. First and foremost, reply in a timely manner. If you are unable to review, we would greatly appreciate your taking the time to send the names of two or three persons who could be asked to serve in your stead. Second, if you are able

to review the manuscript, make it a priority, reading and replying within a few days if at all possible. We do not discourage our reviewers from consulting members of their laboratories when preparing a review, but the editor should be so informed at the time of the consultation and, most important, the signing referee should read and take responsibility for the content of the report. Finally, please do not remove yourself for long periods of time from our list of active referees unless your position has changed in such a manner that you are not able to offer an informed opinion on new work — for example, if you are mainly doing administrative work or have retired and are not keeping up with the literature. In return, we will do our best not to overburden our valued reviewers and to assign them only those manuscripts with which they are likely to have significant familiarity. In this manner, the call for moral responsibility in reviewing can be met.

REFERENCES

- (1) Rodman, H. *Am. Sociol.* **1970**, *5*, 351–357.

Published: May 11, 2011