

EDITOR'S COMMENTS

How Reviews Shape *MIS Quarterly*: A Primer for Reviewers and Editors

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Top information systems journals thrive only because of countless contributions of volunteers. This volunteerism occurs both at the reviewer and editorial levels. Unlike other scientific disciplines where reviewing is a paid activity, nearly all journals in the IS field are blessed with volunteer evaluators who are motivated by feelings of stewardship, good citizenship, and a strong underlying desire to improve the research being considered for publication. If asked, almost everyone associated with this process would agree that reviewing has a definite influence on the final form of accepted papers and, even when a paper is not moved forward in the review cycle, the revised manuscript has usually improved.

Naturally, not all reviewing is so completely idealistic and altruistic, but when seen in its best light, this is what it looks like. Editors are the public side of the review process and these servants of the profession interact directly (senior editor or SE role) or indirectly (associate editor or AE role) with the authors or prospective authors and, at *MIS Quarterly* (*MISQ*) are not blind to the identities of authors. Authors always know the name and contact information of their SE, but only become aware of the good offices of the AEs when a paper is accepted and published.

Reviewers are those Good Samaritans who remain anonymous even after their work is done. Their careful assessment and recommendations shape the manuscripts and eventually the quality of *MISQ*. *MISQ* is indeed fortunate to have a continuous stream of giving scholars devoted to the IS community.

In this editorial, we intend to revisit how important high quality reviews are to the journal and how the review process, in turn, shapes the journal. Over the years, *MISQ* editors have shared suggestions for reviewers and editors (see "Roles at *MIS Quarterly*" at <http://misq.org/roles/>). See also Lee (1995) and Saunders (2005b).

The Dominating Vision

When considering reviews and how these affect manuscripts, it is critical to keep in mind that, in the final analysis, *MISQ* is in the business of publishing manuscripts. The journal would cease to exist without a sufficient number of high quality manuscripts that are honed to a finer edge during the review process.

But the manuscripts that we are unable to publish should be considered “returned” or “not moved forward” rather than rejected. Sadly, the terminology of variant forms of the term “reject” is so widely known and used that it is doubtful that any proposed change in the language would succeed, no matter how reasonable and well intentioned.

What is of likely interest to both reviewers and authors, though, is what should be occurring in the minds of reviewers and editors before a paper is returned. A first operating principle is that evaluators must examine ways the paper can be shaped so that it may, conceivably, be moved forward. This line of thinking begins with the SE and AE when the manuscript is submitted and then continues on with the reviewers as they scrutinize the quality of the manuscript. If the SE and AE see something of value in the manuscript that can be addressed before the paper goes to the reviewers, they should not hesitate to ask the authors to revise so that precious reviewer time is utilized more effectively. This evaluative process prior to the reviewers seeing the paper is called *screening* and it may take one or more rounds and involve any combination of the two editors and the authors. In other words, the SE may decide to screen the paper alone, may invite the AE to join in the screening, or may rely on the AE’s screening alone. The process may be a formal one of editorial reports and authorial revisions, or it may involve a sharing of ideas informally, utilizing a medium like e-mail via the Manuscript Central (MC) online reviewing system. Always channeling comments through MC’s e-mail facility allows us to create an audit trail that is thereafter accessible to evaluators so they can fully recall and understand what has taken place.¹

A second operating principle is that we must accept that there is no perfect manuscript. When we identify issues with manuscript execution or contribution, it is deceptively easy to recommend rejection. Helping authors navigate through the perceived imperfections requires thoughtful reflection and it takes time. Expediency should never subdue our primary role as servants to the community. This means that we should view our role as seekers of diamonds in the rough (Saunders 2005b; Straub 2009). Clearly, no part of this vision should come at the cost of quality; the vision implies a mindset about how our efforts can result in a high quality manuscript that *MISQ* will eventually be able to publish.

In recent years, a concern has been raised about rejecting manuscripts that, with proper navigation, could otherwise have been published in *MISQ* (a Type II error). It is a loss for *MISQ* when the authors publish a manuscript in another top journal after following the suggestions of *MISQ* reviewers and editors who rejected the manuscript. Could *MISQ* have collaborated with the authors to better shape the manuscript? What is the downside if they were to take this approach? Certainly, this will mean that sometimes *MISQ* will publish manuscripts that perhaps should not have been published (a Type I error). Should this happen, the research community will self-correct by not citing such weaker manuscripts. Type II errors, however, are irreversible. (For details on this idea, see Straub 2008.)

What Should You Do in the Reviewer Role?

There are a number of good practices that will enhance the reviewing process and help the journal avoid both Type II and Type I errors.

1. Look for sparkles emanating from the diamonds-in-the-rough (Saunders 2005a; Straub 2010). These sparkles can be in the form of
 - novel ideas proposed in the paper,
 - an innovative methodological approach,
 - interesting or new contexts or less explored settings, or
 - how the findings inform the practice of IS.
2. Think of yourself as a coauthor (see Pavlou’s comments on pp. ix-xii in Saunders 2005a) and consider the question, how would I polish the diamond so that the sparkling light can come through the perceived imperfections?

¹Responses to MC e-mail go to the original sender’s e-mail address, which creates a small confusion and a bit of extra work for the review team. One simple ploy to fully employ the audit trail function is to “select all” and copy the entire e-mail message one has received into memory. Then enter MC, invoke the e-mail system by clicking on the hyperlinked recipient’s name, followed by pasting the earlier correspondence into MC’s e-mail system.

3. For each weakness in the manuscript that you identify, think of a corresponding way you personally would try to overcome that weakness—framing this as if it were your own manuscript and you were responding via a three-column point-by-point table, even if you think that it cannot be accomplished in the version under review.²
4. It goes without saying that as a reviewer you will examine the paper independently from the rest of the review team and that this recommendation will be highly valued by the AE and SE. However, please consider any deliberate signals from the SE and the AE prior to writing your review. Since they have screened the manuscript before sending it to the reviewers, they might have already expressed their going-in impressions when inviting you to review. In some cases, they may have already worked with the authors to “reshape the diamond in the rough” before sending it to you. Note the R1 or R2 suffix in the manuscript log number even when you are reviewing the manuscript for the first time. These indicate that, as a result of prior screening, a revision(s) has already taken place. Your review may reinforce the SE’s/AE’s impression or help identify problems in areas in which you are in a better position to render an opinion. Occasionally, you may be able to identify a new opportunity that the SE/AE, or even the authors, may have missed. In each case, an issue-resolution combination from you on how to overcome the problems will greatly facilitate the SE’s decision and also provide authors with meaningful guidance.
5. When reviewing for a special issue of *MISQ*, take into account that the editors have evaluated the manuscript for “fit” with the special issue. If you do not see a clear fit, you should not hesitate to express this belief; however, don’t let the fit issue influence your recommendation.
6. Although you serve as a reviewer, at other times you also take on the role of an author. Like other authors, it is (highly) likely that your work was rejected in the past. You may even feel that it was unfairly rejected. As a reviewer, don’t let yourself inadvertently compare the paper under review with your past rejected manuscript. If you have concerns about quality, be specific in sharing with the editors why you think the quality or rigor is wanting (e.g., weak theoretical framing, incomplete analysis, etc.).
7. Understand the implications of your recommendation: Major Revision; Reject but invite new submission; or Reject. Any of these recommendations will usually balance such features as the novelty, importance, or timeliness of the topic, and the overall contribution against the manuscript’s scholarly rigor. Below are some ways to think about which of the two “Reject” and “Reject but invite new submission” recommendations is most appropriate.

Reject—when the manuscript shows very limited promise. If in the first round, a reject could be due to fundamental issues in theoretical contribution, construct validity, or shortcomings in the data collection, none of which can be readily addressed. In the second round or later, the reject recommendation could be a result of the authors not being able to successfully execute on the review team suggestions.

The implication of the reject recommendation (if echoed by the SE) is that *MISQ* chooses not to move the manuscript forward in the review process in its current form. A substantially different manuscript could be resubmitted if the authors can take such measures as (1) collecting new data (assuming this was the major problem), (2) reconceptualization of the constructs and theories, (3) overcoming concerns about the data analysis (if any), and so forth. In short, when papers are radically reshaped, the authors are invited to reposition the paper as a brand new manuscript and submit it as such to *MISQ* (being sure to reveal the history of the reworking and its prior review by *MISQ*).

Reject, but invite new submission. This recommendation should be made when a manuscript’s theme is novel, timely, fills a gap in our understanding, or extends theoretical boundaries, but significant challenges remain in data, theory, or analysis and these challenges call into question the findings or the contribution. In short, this recommendation means that the revision should be considered to be highly risky and, rather than encourage authors to believe that the chances of the manuscript eventually being accepted are even or fairly high, the message to authors is that the chances are uncertain. As an example, the rejection may be because of significant flaws in the current theoretical framing of the manuscript.

² Three-column response documents are preferable to the standard two-column format so that the first column can simply number the evaluator’s comment and the authors’ matched response. This gives the authors the straightforward option to refer the review team back to a previous answer by citing the comment number. This approach avoids unnecessary authorial repetition and “update anomaly” errors. It can also indicate clearly to the reviewers where the authors are following the prescriptions of the editors.

In the second round or later, this recommendation reflects a view that the authors will not be able to address the issue or that the only way to overcome the difficulties is to take such actions as gather new data, reconceptualize the constructs, or revise the data analysis, the evaluative outcomes of any of which are unclear. The implication of this recommendation would be that the authors may resubmit after addressing the review team's previous comments. However, the manuscript is treated as a new submission with a new manuscript number. Although the authors may recommend the previous review team, there is no obligation on the part of the SE to retain the original review team members or for the team to serve again. Authors may also request a new SE for the paper, but this variant on usual policy is at the discretion of the Editor-in-Chief.

There is a variant on *reject, but invite new submission* about which it is worth making special mention. Reviewers may see greater potential in the paper if it is resubmitted as a Research Note rather than as a regular Research Article. Research Notes are defined as shorter contributions, and they may be either theoretical or atheoretical (i.e., solely empirical contribution). A paper is typically designated as Research Notes when the contribution is limited, but there are aspects of the paper that are novel, respond to an established research stream, and are citable.

Major revision means that you believe that the paper shows promise if the authors can revise the paper according to the issue-resolutions you are proposing. In the *MISQ* review process we are trying to use this designation thoughtfully and carefully. If the revision appears to you to be quite risky, then you should not use the recommendation major revision, but one of the reject categories. Once the review team moves consciously down the path of revision (either major revision or minor revision, the latter of which usually only occurs after one or more rounds), the authors should be heartened in carrying out their revision. This is intended to be a return to the earlier days at the journal where a "revise and resubmit" meant that the odds of the paper being finally accepted were fairly high. In recent decades, the "revision" categories began to include papers that would have been rejected in earlier years, perhaps because big-hearted reviewers want to give authors a second or third chance. The problem with this form of latitudinarianism is that it becomes more and more difficult to reject a paper later when the issues are, in all likelihood, just too deep to overcome. Late round rejections are very hard on the review team, but, naturally, hardest on authors who have undertaken extensive revisions in the vain hope that the extensive revisions suggested have been addressed.

What Should You Do in the Editor Role?

The evaluations of the editors—the AE and the SE—differ in one small way from that of the reviewers. Editors also have an option of returning the paper to the authors without involving the review team at all (the term that has gained the widest usage for this action is *desk reject*). Editors are carefully chosen for their ability to think holistically about the field and its research needs. When the editors are not onboard with regard to the initial promise of a paper, then it is most unlikely that positive feedback, even universal positive feedback, from the reviewers will reverse that judgment.

In fact, although it might seem that authors would dread a desk reject decision, this does not seem to be the case. Desk rejects are most frequently timely decisions. Better that authors receive this otherwise bad news quickly rather than after a lengthy review cycle that delays placing the paper (hopefully revised in significant ways) in another good venue. Veteran authors who understand both the difficulties and the triumphs of the review process are also among the first to see the practicalities in handling papers expeditiously, especially when the paper has not generated the level of excitement that would be needed on the part of the editors. A candid assessment, even if the outcome is to return the paper, should be valued by authors. It consumes much less of the authors' time as it equally husbands scarce and valuable reviewer resources.

Conclusion

"With all its faults, we love it still..." is how the phrase goes and this adequately sums up a balanced scorecard of the peer review process. When scientific work began to be published in the 18th century, there were no peer reviews. As a result, a lot of crackpot ideas were circulated as truisms to budding scientists and society at large. This clearly harmed the scientific enterprise as well as those who were trying to be methodically rigorous. Today we all know that however thorough and outwardly fair a reviewing process is, it can always be improved. This should always be our goal. It may be that our reach will exceed our grasp and that this goal will always elude us, but we should never stop trying.

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