EDITOR'S COMMENTS ▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬

Community Building through Virtuous Reviewing ▬▬▬▬▬▬▬

By: **Sue Brown, Editor-in-Chief**

In this editorial, I focus on the peer review process at *MIS Quarterly* (MISQ). Many editors before me, both at MISQ and at other journals, have written about reviewing (e.g., Goes, 2014; Lee, 1995; Leidner et al., 2022; Miller & Van de Ven, 2015; Rai, 2016; Sarker et al., 2013; Saunders, 2005; Straub, 2009). Peer review is an essential part of the publication process. Timely and thoughtful reviews can speed up the publication process, while endless requests for additional proof can slow it down. In this editorial, I aim to highlight areas where we, as a community, agree and where we can continue to improve upon the quality and outcomes of the review process.

It is important to keep in mind that reviews are written for two audiences: the authors and the editors. A review should be written so that both the authors and the editors have a clear understanding of the problems and the possible solution set. Reviewers are not only telling the authors what they believe is needed in the paper, they are also telling the editors what the issues are and what they see as the path forward. This is important because it provides some insight into the level of detail necessary in a review to ensure that the points are clearly communicated to both audiences. What follows is written from the perspective of both audiences. Table 1 provides answers to some common questions from reviewers.

Community Agreement on Reviewing

A number of editors have clearly articulated many important elements in reviews. Consistently, across the perspectives the message has been to:

1. *Clearly articulate the major issues* that need to be addressed and possible solutions. Be very clear that the major issues are, in fact, major issues with the research and not simply stylistic preferences of the reviewer or assumptions about the journal. For example, statements such as "the field has moved on from the use of Twitter (X) data" are neither helpful nor accurate. Yet we see variations of these statements for methods (e.g., surveys, experiments), participants (e.g., students, MTurkers), techniques (e.g., PLS, CNN), etc. Unless the journal has an explicit policy, it is best to avoid such statements in reviews. Saunders's (2005) "golden rule for developmental reviewing" is that for each problem, a potential solution should be identified. By suggesting possible paths forward, one provides additional information about the problem that the editors can use in their reports. It is important to articulate the major issues *in the first round* so that there are no surprises later in the process. By doing so, it is possible to reduce the number of rounds for papers to move forward, which will ultimately reduce the time to publication. A revision might uncover new major issues and they should be identified, even in a later round. But when a revision has addressed the concerns, reviewers should not feel compelled to find new issues simply for the sake of finding something.

2. *Provide evidence in support of your claims and references where appropriate.* This should not be read to suggest that reviewers need to do the authors' work. It should be read as suggesting that it is more helpful to the authors and editors to say, for example, that "Leonardi (2011) has addressed this" rather than simply saying that "this has been done." It is possible that a reviewer might believe that something has "been done" when this is not the case. By looking for evidence to substantiate the claim, the reviewer may end up revising their perspective on the paper. Providing evidence and references is also quite helpful to editors and avoids sending the authors on a wild goose chase (Rai, 2016).

3. *Be caringly candid in your comments.* It is important to be kind, frank (Lee 1995), and civil (Leidner et al., 2022), and to "write the review you would want to receive" (Rai, 2016) . As a reviewer, it is important to be honest but in a way that helps the authors appreciate what you are saying. It is easy to hide behind the anonymity of the review process, but I encourage reviewers to adopt the stance of only writing a review you would be willing to share with the author face to face.

An editor's job is made harder when valuable comments are written in a negative or condescending tone. To potentially minimize tone issues, I recommend that you leave enough time to set your review aside and reread it prior to sending it so that you can be sure that it is, in fact, a review you would want to receive.

4. ***Be on time with your review.*** To continue to reduce the time to acceptance, reviews must be on time. If you cannot commit to completing a review in the allotted time, then it is best to decline the invitation. I note that individuals who continually decline to review are noticed, so I caution against making a habit of it. I also caution against committing to a review and then not submitting one. If something happens in your life to cause a delay, simply communicate with the AE. Ghosting the AE is a bad practice. We all understand that life happens and that unexpected delays can occur, but communicating that you will be late or unable to complete the review is key. It is important to keep in mind that delays in the review process can have significant long term consequences for an author's career.

5. ***Share your expertise.*** If you can do so in a general way, then it is good to share your expertise in the review. However, if your expertise in terms of a particular paper is rather narrow and sharing it might identify you, then it would be better to share it in private comments to the editor (Sarker et al., 2023). This will help the editors put your review comments in context.

6. ***Maintain consistency between private comments and your review.*** It is not appropriate, for example, to share private comments to the editor stating that "this paper has no chance" if your review was extremely supportive of the paper's potential. Rather, it would be better to say: "I debated on reject vs. major revision and landed on major revision because I think, with additional data, the problems are correctable." Of course, this assumes that you shared the need for additional data in the review itself. Note that private comments are not required. You have the option to enter them in the system, but if your review stands on its own (and most should), there is no need to add any private comments.

In addition to the above, there are three other suggestions that appear in multiple discussions of reviewing: *look for reasons to accept a paper, advocate for novelty,* and *preserve the voice of the authors.* I wish to highlight these items, as I see them as areas where we can truly move the needle.

7. ***Look for reasons to accept a paper.*** Editors (e.g., Kohli & Straub, 2011; Saunders, 2005; Straub, 2009) have suggested looking for the "sparkles" and the good parts of the paper that can be further developed. However, this runs somewhat counter to our training. During our doctoral programs, we are taught to identify the flaws in papers. Of course, in most doctoral programs, the papers in which we are identifying flaws are published papers. Interestingly, we do not seem to have trouble identifying the problems in papers that have been published, even though they went through multiple rounds of review. This serves to highlight that there is no such thing as a perfect paper—even after multiple rounds of thoughtful input from other scholars.

    The quest for the perfect paper can interfere with our assessment of papers. Straub (2008) highlights this concern in his discussion of Type II errors related to the rejection of good papers. Rather than seeking a perfect paper, what if we aim to bring out the best in the paper that was actually submitted? Some questions that reviewers can ask: Is the paper addressing relevant questions in the given context? Are there critical missing elements that the paper must contain in the given context, and is the analysis correct? Will anyone else will want to read the paper? (Speigel, 2012; Tang, 2022). From an editor's perspective, I ask: Who will cite this work? Are there other people doing research in this area who would benefit from this paper? Could this paper launch a new line of inquiry? Will researchers outside IS find this work interesting? These are all questions that go beyond the methodological and technical questions of a paper and get us to think about the paper's broader impact, even if the paper has some potential imperfections.

    We should also ask ourselves if there are underlying reasons influencing our approach to a paper. Reviewers are also authors who are hoping that their own papers will be accepted, and while some might believe that journal publishing is a zero-sum game, I can assure you that is not the case. If you identify the good elements in a paper you are reviewing and it ultimately gets accepted, this will not make it less likely that your own paper will be accepted. Sometimes after receiving a rejection, reviewers might have a hard time seeing other papers as better than their own paper that was rejected. *If you find yourself in this situation, I encourage you to step back from the paper and do your very best to review it on its own merits, not in comparison to your paper.* As an author myself, I know this is hard, but as a community member, it is essential to do this. If you feel you cannot assess the paper objectively, it is best to decline the review.

8. ***Advocate for novelty.*** The challenge of novelty is that it asks reviewers to think beyond today and what is already well-established in the discipline. Papers that question the fundamental arguments that a reviewer has, perhaps, made their career advocating can be even more challenging. However, in order for the discipline to advance, we must embrace new ideas. As a community, we must be open to ideas that do not necessarily follow the patterns we expect. Type II errors are more detrimental to journals than Type I errors (Straub, 2008). Although I am not advocating that we start accepting bad papers, the reality is that the market will decide the value of the work based on the citations it attracts. Personally, I am more concerned about the risk of interesting papers being rejected.

    To embrace novelty, we must abandon checklists. Embracing novelty requires reviewers to ask what is new in a paper. New ideas require different assessments because the usual frameworks will not work (Rai, 2016). Our discipline has changed significantly over the decades, and we are at an inflection point with respect to AI and its impact on individuals, organizations, and society. The problems we study as well as the theories and methods we use are going to evolve and, as a community, we must not only be open to new ideas but must also actively solicit and nurture them.

9. ***Preserve the voice of the authors.*** Over the past few decades, developmental and virtuous reviewing has been a prominent topic of discussion at MISQ, and this approach to reviewing is an important part of our identity. Fundmaentally, this approach is about helping authors develop the best version of *their* paper, not the paper that you, as the reviewer, wish to see. Some review comments suggest that the authors are not writing the paper that the reviewers want to see. On the surface, this seems like a simple enough statement and could imply that the authors are simply not making progress in improving the paper. All too often, however, it reflects the idea that the reviewers are trying to move the authors in a direction that the authors did not intend. The questions I ask when I see such comments are: Will the changes the reviewers are requesting correct problems in the paper or truly help the paper improve? Or are the changes pushing the authors to write the paper the reviewers think they should have written? These are two different perspectives. In the first case, the suggested changes seek to turn the paper into a better version of itself through addressing weaknesses in the problematization, theorizing, research design, analysis, etc. In the second case, the changes seek to turn the paper into a different paper altogether. In the second case, the voice of the authors has been altered but not necessarily improved.

    Kohli and Straub (2011) propose that reviewers take on the perspective of a co-author, while Rai (2016) states that reviewers need to guard against "slipping into the co-author role." Interestingly, both recommendations advocate for the same thing, just from different perspectives. Miller and Van de Ven (2015) provide clarity on this when they talk about endogenous versus exogenous reviews. Endogenous reviews assess the paper from the perspective of the authors, leveraging the authors' arguments and approaches in their own identification of issues and preserving the voice of the authors. Exogenous reviews, on the other hand, approach reviews from the reviewer's mindset and impose the reviewer's worldview on the paper. Kohli and Straub are advocating for an endogenous perspective, while Rai is advocating against the exogenous view. However, both recommendations lead to the same endpoint—reviewers are not co-authors and should not impose their stylistic preferences upon the authors.

Reviewing Revisions

If you are invited to review a revision of a paper you have previously reviewed, you have an obligation to review it. It is essential to the process that we maintain consistency in the review panel over time. I appreciate that things happen, people change positions, and conflicts of interest arise during the course of a paper's review process. But these are the exceptions and not the rule. If you are invited to review a revision of a paper you reviewed in a prior round, the default should be to say yes.

The approach to reviewing a revision is slightly different. Prior to conducting the review, it is important to look at the review packet, paying careful attention to the SE's decision and the AE's comments. You may find that some of your comments were highlighted as options rather than requirements. With these comments in mind, you should conduct your revision review. If an issue you felt strongly about was dismissed by the editors and you continue to see it as a major issue, it would be best to reach out to the editors to discuss it. It will not be helpful to the authors or the editors if you continue to raise the issue and understanding the editors' perspective can help you write your review.

Transitioning from Reviewer to Editor

Quality reviewing is a necessary condition for becoming an editor. But there is a transition that has to be made from reviewer to editor. At this point, I want to reiterate Sarker et al.'s (2023) comment that the SE and AE "are *informed* by the reviews—*they are not bound by reviewer recommendations* (p. 1324, emphasis in original). The editorial role is not a vote-counting role. In fact, my preference is to never see any mention of how many of each type of recommendation there were in a review packet. I do not believe it helps the authors improve their paper. Nor do I believe it matters. Recommendations are provided as a short-cut summary of reviewer comments. On more than one occasion I have seen that the recommendation selected was inconsistent with the comments provided in the review. Sharing recommendations serves only to discourage or confuse the authors. What matters is what the reviewers say in their comments and how the editors make sense of it.

The role of the AE is integrator, extender, and recommender. An important job of the AE is to integrate the reviews. There is nothing more challenging for an author to deal with than being told to "address all reviewer comments" when each comment takes the authors in a different direction. The AE's job is to find the commonalities across the reviews, identify and clarify the deviations, and essentially help the authors navigate the review packet. The AE can and should add their own perspectives, thereby extending the reviewers' comments. The AE may even disagree with some of the comments. That is ok. The point is that the AE report should help the authors revise their paper—whether for MISQ or another journal. Ultimately, the AE makes a recommendation regarding the disposition of the paper.

The role of the SE is decision maker and guidance provider. The ultimate decision maker in this process is the senior editor. As an AE or a reviewer, there is no such thing as having your "decision overturned," as the only person actually making a decision is the SE. All other members of the review panel are providing input and recommendations. Again, the SE should not feel compelled to take the reviewers' or AE's comments as the last word. The SE has the last word. It saddens me when I hear an SE say "I had no choice" but to reject the paper. In reality, if the SE sees something in a paper that the reviewers and the AE missed, it is perfectly acceptable to move the paper forward. Likewise, if the SE sees flaws that were missed, it is perfectly acceptable to reject the paper. In addition to making decisions, SEs should be providing guidance. The SE report should serve as the road map for a revision. SEs should not be "post offices," simply passing along the AE report with their stamp of approval. As the ultimate decision maker in the process, it should be clear to the authors exactly what needs to be done to move the paper forward, and the SE is the one who should be doing that.

Maintaining Integrity in the Process

Integrity is essential to maintaining the quality and reputation of the peer review process and the journal. Sarker et al. (2023) did an excellent job of outlining various conflicts of interest and ethical issues that could arise in the review process. I want to echo concerns regarding one of the issues they raise—gaming the system. Since the announcement of my appointment as EIC, a fair number of people have raised concerns about paper trading in our discipline. This is a practice where authors and reviewers share their papers, nominate one another as reviewers, and make agreements to accept each other's papers. This process violates the fundamental goal of the peer review system, which is intended to provide an independent assessment of research quality. It can also play out across journals, making it difficult to detect. I do not believe that this is a widespread practice, nor do I believe that all perceptions of this are, in fact, truly paper trading. As an example, reviewers sometimes question how a process unfolds. One concern I have heard is the perception that the SE was "playing favorites." These comments typically arise when the majority of the reviews are quite critical, yet the SE moves the paper forward. Another is the perception that the SE "had it out for" an author. These comments typically arise when the majority of the reviews appear positive, yet the SE rejects the paper anyway. In either case, there could be an issue or not.

I caution reviewers and authors from jumping to conclusions about process shenanigans because there are many factors at play. For example, the SE may be relying on the advice of one particular reviewer because the SE knows that reviewer's expertise and background and considers the advice particularly relevant and possibly pivotal for the paper. Alternatively, the SE may have information about other papers in the works (e.g., that they have handled) that might lead this paper to make more or less of a contribution. It is possible that, despite the recommendations against this, the private comments to the editor are different in tone and substance from what is presented in the document seen by the authors and other reviewers. Overall, the SE likely has a broader view of the field and is in a better position to assess the contribution of a paper than any single reviewer or even the AE. That is, after all, why they are in the SE role. With that said, it is important that authors and reviewers feel comfortable bringing issues forward. If you suspect that an integrity violation has occurred, please contact me or the EIC of the relevant journal. I will look into any concerns that are raised. In order for the peer review process to work, it must be trusted.

Concluding Remarks

The reviewing and the editorial process can make or break a journal. We all have a commitment to the information systems community to conduct timely, thoughtful reviews and to nurture interesting ideas to publication. I encourage reviewers to look for the good in papers, to help authors improve *their* paper regardless of its ultimate outlet, and to write the type of review they would be comfortable sharing with the authors face to face. The community benefits from this approach as it allows more research to move forward, preserves the authors' voice, and encourages authors to continue sending their very best work to MISQ.

I wish to express my sincere appreciation to the entire community of editors and reviewers for engaging in this extremely important volunteer activity. I also want to express my appreciation for those aspiring reviewers who attend reviewer development workshops and reach out to editorial board members offering to be part of the process. It takes the entire community to create, improve, and ultimately publish the very best research in MISQ.

Table 1. Reviewing Q&A

How do I become a reviewer? One way is to participate in a reviewer workshop. At the workshop, you will get to meet editors and your name and information will be put on a list that these editors can access. Another way is to be known for publishing on a certain topic. This takes a bit more time, but that is the primary way we select reviewers. You could identify an AE or two who have overlapping research interests with you. Reaching out to them directly and providing your credentials can be helpful to the AEs in building their reviewer network. You should also feel free to reach out to the EIC and make sure that you have an MISQ ScholarOne account (https://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/misq) that is current in terms of your contact information and areas of expertise. Please do NOT spam the entire editorial board with a request to review and please be patient, as it can take time to find the right paper for you to review.

How long should my review be? There is no single answer to this question. Much depends on the paper itself, the reviewer's expertise, and the round of review. On average, for a first-round review, three pages (single-spaced) are typically more than sufficient to identify the major issues, provide substantiation for them, and offer suggestions for improvement. There may be situations or contexts where additional explanation of an issue is necessary. In my experience, one-page reviews are typically not sufficient and tend to be either a laundry list of questions with little guidance for the authors or editors or the identification of a single "fatal flaw" under the assumption it's the paper killer. Neither of these approaches is appropriate.

Why did the AE/SE overturn my decision? This question gets asked but is not relevant. Reviewers and AEs make recommendations. There is no overturning. The only person making a decision is the SE.

The AE/SE decision was opposite mine, does that mean I'm a bad reviewer? Absolutely not! The point of the peer review process is to solicit multiple inputs to help authors improve their papers. The AE and SE look across all the reviews. The SE is expected to have a broader view of the field that could lead them to a decision that is different from any one reviewer. They are also weighing the evidence in making their decision. Rather than looking at the outcome, look at the comments. Were there comments made by the editors that were consistent with one or some of your comments? Did the editors see the same issues but perceive them to be more or less critical than you? These sorts of things are a better indicator of your reviewing quality than whether or not the editors agreed with your recommended outcome.

I know the authors, should I decline the review? This is a relatively small community (compared to many other disciplines) and many of us know each other, particularly within certain research subdomains. If your relationship primarily revolves around connecting at conferences or workshops, then it is ok to do the review. Clearly, if you have been co-authors within the last five years (published or in progress), you should recuse yourself. If there is an advisor-advisee relationship, you should also recuse yourself (for life). The question you should ask yourself is this: Would a reasonable person perceive a conflict of interest? Whether you believe you can be objective or not, it's the perception of impropriety that can have a negative impact on both the authors and the journal. When in doubt, let the AE know the extent of your connection and they can make the call.

I've seen this paper before, what should I do? The answer to this depends on where and how you've seen the paper. If you saw it presented at a conference or workshop, then you know who the authors are. In a perfect world, authors are workshopping their papers prior to submission. So, the likelihood of this happening is rather high. At this point, the question is whether or not you can be objective. If you cannot, then please decline the review. If you reviewed this paper for another journal, please disclose that to the AE as soon as possible. The AE and SE will then make a decision regarding whether or not you should review the paper. If you suspect plagiarism, notify the AE as soon as possible with an explanation for your suspicion. The AE and SE will handle it from there.

How do I become an editor? As I indicated in my first editorial, there are two criteria—perform timely and thoughtful reviews and publish in top outlets. Doing high-quality reviews gets you noticed by the AE, which in turn will lead the AE to nominate you as a potential editor.

I've done high-quality reviews and published in MISQ, why haven't I been asked to be an editor? This is a fair question. The reality is that in making editorial board appointments, we consider many factors. We look at the distribution across research topics and methods. We also look at global representation. Overall, the goal is to have a diverse board that represents the breadth of the discipline. Ultimately, there are limited spots. My advice is to be persistent and patient.

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