

MAR15-2014-002188

Abstract for an Invited Paper
for the MAR15 Meeting of
the American Physical Society

There is no “I” in referee: Why referees should be anonymous

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From the early days of modern science, it has been recognized that scientific claims must be verified by someone who is not the maker of those claims, and who furthermore has no stake in the matter. In other words, claims need to be evaluated objectively, by the community. The way in which this tends to be done is by peer review conducted by journals. Peer review as currently practiced touches on the themes of trust, where the trust is in institutions and procedures that emerge from expert communities. The practice of peer review is viewed as a citizenly duty of scientists in the scientific community, because all scientists take turns serving either as authors, referees, and editors in the peer review process. We lack the resources to have a work evaluated by the entire community, so we substitute with a representative. Yet, in most examples of scientific review, the referee or referees are anonymous. This question is particularly important when the peer review process is brought to bear in order to evaluate matters beyond scientific validity, more “subjective” criteria such as relative importance, broadness of interest – criteria that do not appear to have an objective standard of comparison and validation. I will show that the anonymity of referees, far from endangering this trust, actually strengthens it. I will show that this anonymity is crucial in order to maintain any objectivity in scientific peer review, and why authors should not try to unmask the referee.

¹Also at The American Physical Society (APS).