

MAR16-2015-005158

Abstract for an Invited Paper
for the MAR16 Meeting of
the American Physical Society

The Curious Origins of the Scientific Referee

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Where did the figure of the scientific referee come from, and why? Beginning in the 1820s, in the midst of reform movements in English science and in English politics, a number of British scientific societies established formal systems for reading and reporting on manuscripts by special readers, who soon became known as referees. In this personage came to be juxtaposed elements of the legal expert, the trustworthy gentleman, the state bureaucrat, and even the anonymous literary reviewer. But when the scientific referee appeared on the scene of British science, it was not certain who he was, or what he was supposed to be for. The initial impetus for the Royal Society of Londons referee system had been as much about generating publicity as making anonymous judgments. But gradually the referee report became shrouded in secrecy, and the referee was increasingly viewed as an agent for conferring rewards on authors in exchange for contributions to knowledge. The conception of the referee as primarily a gatekeeper of knowledge became dominant only later in the century, as scientific practitioners came to perceive the existence of a special set of texts called the scientific literature that could be marked off from other periodicals and which required protecting. The notion that some form of peer review – as it came to be known during the Cold War – was a sine qua non of legitimate scientific journals was an even later development.