Guest Editorial

Improving Peer Reviewer Guidelines at *C&RL*

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This editorial outlines considerations for the *College & Research Libraries* peer review and editorial processes prompted by the publication of an article by Kristen Antelman (2025) in the May issue of *C&RL*. In response to this article, #CripLib published a post (Anonymous, 2025) which questioned the editorial decisions and quality of peer review at *College & Research Libraries*. Smith's (2025) letter to the editor also noted some issues with the use of sources in the article. In 2024, before the publication of the Antelman article and the responses to it, the previous and current *C&RL* editors had already identified peer reviewer guidance as a need to address and put together a working group, including one of the authors of this editorial, to create better guidelines and documentation for peer reviewers. This work is continuing, but we want to offer a variety of ways in which *C&RL* can better ensure rigorous publications. We wish to address the role that peer review plays within scholarship, based on our experience as authors, peer reviewers, and members of the *C&RL* editorial board. One author, Teresa Schultz, is in her second year on the *C&RL* editorial board, and the other, Sarah Fitzgerald, is in her seventh year. Although our views do not reflect the views of the whole board, the conversations the board has held reflect an agreement of the assertion that the journal needs updated guidelines for peer reviewers.

Many scholars have identified that peer review is fallible and that problems exist within peer review systems. For instance, one study found that women are underrepresented among journal editors and peer reviewers (Murray et al., 2019). Likewise, male-authored manuscripts were more likely to be accepted for publication compared to female-authored manuscripts, an effect that was even greater when all reviewers were men. Scholars from non-Western countries who identify as LGTBQ+ report that peer reviewers often demonstrate Western biases, dismissing what they label as niche research or focusing on less-than-perfect grammar (Nopas, 2025).

Need for More Training and Clarification in Peer Review

Scholars often do not receive peer review training (Mulligan et al., 2012). For instance, one of the authors of this editorial learned by doing, relying on the journal's guidelines for peer reviewers. This resulted in feelings of imposter syndrome in her first few years of peer reviewing. Various groups have crafted training aimed at how to peer review, such as guidance from publishers and not-for-profit groups. One leading organization is the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE, 2017), which offers guidance for peer reviewers and editors. However, the resources COPE developed do not always make their way to peer reviewers, particularly if reviewers

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do not actively seek them out, or if someone does not direct them to the resources. Instead, it's likely that the most guidance or training that any new peer reviewer will receive will come from the journal they are volunteering with, which places the responsibility of guidance on the journal. Indeed, as peer review works differently from scholarly journal to scholarly journal, it's important for each journal to clearly and publicly state its peer review policies and rules.

Reviewers and editors need a clear, shared understanding of the process of review and recommendations before participating in a review. Without explicit guidance regarding what is expected of peer reviewers and clear explanations about the impact of their recommendations, miscommunication and problems can happen. The creation of this documentation for *C&RL*, which will be shared publicly once complete, will hopefully improve peer reviews and communication between reviewers and editors, as well as editors and authors. We also hope these changes will empower others in the field to contribute their expertise as peer reviewers. This documentation is a start to what will be an iterative process to improve *C&RL*'s peer review guidance.

Other Possible Ways to Support Peer Review

Once *C&RL* shares its updated peer reviewer guidelines, we encourage our fellow editorial board members to join us in exploring additional ways to improve the process for reviewers and authors to ensure rigorous research is published. An apprenticeship model for training new peer reviewers could be one way to develop shared understandings of review standards for *College & Research Libraries*. In such a model, experienced reviewers would be encouraged to conduct a review in tandem with a new reviewer to experience and discuss the process. This model could also help expand the pool of experienced reviewers.

Another potential option for *C&RL* to explore is open peer review, which works to make peer review more transparent. Various forms of open peer review exist. For instance, some types include what is known as open identities, which is when reviewers are identified to the authors and/or readers. However, as mentioned previously, peer review is fallible and even this more open approach has received some criticism by scholars for potentially creating room for reciprocity bias (Ross-Hellauer & Horbach, 2024). *C&RL* has previously experimented with open peer review (Becker & Goek, 2020; Ford, 2017) and opted to not adopt it extensively. One reason the version *C&RL* tested may not have moved forward was because it involved open identities, which can lead to retaliation against reviewers who provide negative feedback. Another form of open peer review focuses on open reports, wherein the reviews are published (Ross-Hellauer & Horbach, 2024). Open reports do not have to be paired with open identities. Publishing anonymous open reports can help protect peer reviewers from retaliation while serving as a mechanism for transparency to readers. We recognize such a step would not happen immediately; however, a more open process could help address reader concerns in future articles by using a more transparent peer review process. The ability to view the reviews would both show readers the suggestions for improvement that were offered by reviewers and would make revisions public.

Peer Reviewing Conceptual Works

There are several broad types of scholarly research, including empirical articles that can take the form of qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods articles, and conceptual or theoretical articles (Mora et al., 2008). Conceptual research explores questions critical to a field,

synthesizes multiple bodies of literature, or advances a new theoretical framework. As most social science research is empirical, reviewers may be less familiar with reviewing conceptual articles. Antelman's (2025) article falls into this type of research. Although conceptual manuscripts might not have an explicit mention of methods, reviewers should encourage authors of conceptual articles to describe their research process, including what bodies of literature the authors draw upon. Like empirical articles, conceptual articles should also describe the objective of their paper, note the theoretical framework, engage with the literature on the topic—both supporting and opposing the author's conclusions—and detail the implications of the argument. When literature is the primary source of data, it is particularly important to discuss the quality and relevance of literature that is introduced.

Reviewing DEI-Related Research

We do not know if changes to the peer review process for *C&RL* would have changed the outcome of the disputed article, and problems could persist in the future. Some reviewers might be tempted to accept or reject an article they agree or disagree with rather than evaluating it on its methodological and logical rigor. We wish to recognize that academic and intellectual freedom protect the free exchange of ideas. Expert educators and scholars, including librarians, need the freedom to determine what constitutes appropriate professional values in their fields. It is important to have scholarly conversations that consider how diversity, equity, and inclusion values relate to our fields and the academic and intellectual freedom that serve as the foundation for education and the advancement of knowledge. The American Association of University Professors (2024) has engaged in these conversations recently and made a case for the compatibility—and even necessity—of pursuing equity in the pursuit of scholarly truth and learning. The American Library Association (2024) has identified equity of access to information as one of its core values. These scholarly conversations are best served by rigorous scholarship competing for acceptance based on its merit and strength of argument. Quality peer review and research that considers the full range of ideas on a topic are the best methods for achieving rigorous scholarship.

The coming changes to *C&RL*'s peer review procedures will hopefully bring better clarity and guidance to those involved. However, the journal should always consider ways it can continue to improve peer review and uphold the values of academic freedom and integrity.

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