

Journal of Participatory Medicine

Podcast

Can We Trust Traditional Peer Review?

[Peter Frishauf](#)

[Richard Smith](#)

[Liz Wager](#)

[Alex Jadad](#)

[Thomas \(Bo\) Adler](#)

Chapter 6: Building a Community

Bo Adler:

Right, and your final point from your earlier was that building a community is a hard thing, and that's where the real challenge is. You could make a game and no one might come; that's what I found with my own little reading group website. That's what Nature might have experienced as well. That's the really big challenge here. I think Wikipedia and DMOZ—they are a couple of projects that have really shown that you can build a community. When talking to friends about it, what they suggest to me is that the way DMOZ started—DMOZ is like Yahoo; it's an open source version of it. The way that Wikipedia and DMOZ started is that they went and found other sources of information and seeded the data. Wikipedia has the advantage that it's trying to represent truth, and everybody has an opinion of truth. So, when they see something wrong, they just jump in and edit it. Making comments about articles is a different thing. I think that you guys have a big challenge there on how to coax the community into participating.

Richard Smith:

Liz.

Liz Wager:

Yes, I have one question and one comment. One thing we seem to have skirted around and not addressed is, we seem to be assuming that the scientific literature is actually all made out about data and reports of original data, and that actually that sort of drives behaviour. Well, in fact if you are talking about clinicians, there are much more influenced by review articles, by editorials, by opinion pieces. And, I think if you are going to rate influence, you've actually got to think up a way of not only rating, you know how good methodologically was the clinical trial, but actually also look at the pieces that, you know the critics, the opinions, the background and so on as well.

And, don't forget that, you know they constitute a large part of the literature, so that's sort of challenge really. My *other question I suppose is PCU says* rating reviewers. Well, I thought we could have come around to thinking well, we don't really need these peer reviewers. So, are we talking about commentators; we are talking about post-publication review here?

Richard Smith:

Yes, we are. I think all, both pre-publication and post-publication reviews, should be published. They may have to be anonymized—hopefully they don't—but, the identity should still be known to a computer or some trusted system so that they could be random reviewed.

Liz Wager:

I certainly would like transparency in terms of people's financial interests, their competing interests. I want to know who these commentators are. It's funny, you mentioned a Facebook for science, and I actually seriously was wondering about whether you could generate a sort of Facebook, in terms of understanding who people worked for, who they worked with, who their friends were. That would actually give you a lot more information than just that sort of classical little disclosure and disclaimer that says what grants they've received and so on. I am afraid I am a bit cynical and skeptical; there are some big interests, big social interests out there. I've got to make sure that the system is not open to abuse. I do want to know the person's interests and where they are coming from. I am not sure I am happy with the idea of anonymity there.

Peter Frishauf:

Yes, I think that's a very valid comment, and any trusted system would have to be able to address that. Alex?

Alex Jadad:

Yes. Thank you very much; I had a wonderful time participating in this conversation.

I would like to make a few points to conclude. The first one is that, from research on quality, we know that it's a very tough construct to define, even, or to quantify. Quality is in the eye of the beholder. And, we have tried to use trust marks for information on the internet, for clinical trials, for quality of life, you name it. It's been—always—a very interesting, never ending process. One of the main reasons behind a lot of the challenges we have been discussing here today is that humans are very clever; we are master manipulators. So, it doesn't matter what system we put in place; it's always open to abuse. There is no way in which we can protect anything that involves competing interest. We can improve the transparency and we can make it more difficult to be manipulated, but we need to be fully aware that it's almost an impossible task. There are new options opening in front of us, and I think we need to acknowledge that we know very little as to how valuable they are going to be—how accepted, how successful. And, we need to remember one of my heroes, Maimonides, eight hundred years ago said *teach thy tongue to say I don't know, and thou shalt progress*. We need to acknowledge that we know very little about what these new possibilities offer

to us. We know that the traditional system doesn't work. We need to consider it as obsolete and potentially harmful, and hopefully start from fresh.

So, I would like to suggest, to end, four issues. One is to idealize, idealization of what we would like to achieve. This comes back to the first question that Liz posed to us. What are we hoping peer review to achieve, and set an ideal. And then, be prepared to experiment, acknowledging that we don't know, and not experiment on our, own which is what most journals are doing now. We should experiment in collaboration with other groups, especially those groups that are using social networking tools like PatientsLikeMe that may offer great opportunity for us to learn together and to progress together. And then, the final comment is to have reasonable expectations to understand that we are dealing with human nature here. Despite our best efforts to try to reach the ideal, we will never be able to get there. Competing interests will continue to creep up to restart the process.

Peter Frishauf:

Well, I thank you very much for that comment.

I agree with you entirely; it really would be very desirable if we could structure the nature of various rating systems that are used so that at least, many online publications put them into place. We could have some basis of comparing one against the other and we are not left with a complete mess. That was the idea behind my proposal that a conference on reputation systems—bringing out a lot of these competing methodologies that are being proposed, and in some cases, used—could air a lot of these different techniques and create some common ground so that we could compare the results of these experiments.

I'd like to thank all of you for participating in this call. If you have any final comments, please do make them now. Let's start again with Richard.

Richard Smith:

Well, just to say that I enjoyed this call. I was a little skeptical that we could talk in an interesting way about this for almost an hour-and-a-half. It certainly fascinates me, and it's been very pleasurable talking to you all. It's left me with a lot of ideas. I think we are at a beginning, not in an end; I'd very much like to be part of the continuing journey.

Peter Frishauf:

Thank you, and Liz?

Liz Wager:

Yes. It's been a good discussion. I am very much looking forward to seeing some participatory readers as well in this Journal of Participatory Medicine. That's the whole idea of the experiment, really developing a community and getting some new models off the ground. I think it should be exciting.

Peter Frishauf:

Bo?

Bo Adler:

Thank you all for inviting me to join your conversation. I mean since I started my own community study, I really believe in this whole idea that science is an open discussion. So, I am looking forward to seeing you guys change the world.