

Publons / SAGE – CAR questions, Andrew Preston / David McCune answers

- Andrew: can you give the 5 line elevator pitch for Publons - how does it work, when did you launch, how many researchers / publishers / institutions / funders etc on board now?
  - Our mission is to speed up science by making peer review faster, more efficient, and more effective. As a first step, Publons works with reviewers, editors, and journals to give credit for peer review. We collect peer reviews, verify that they actually happened, and generate a downloadable pdf that researchers can use in performance reviews. Last year we saw about 1% of the world's reviews on the platform and we expect to add significantly more than that this year.
- Andrew: what is the problem that Publons aims to solve for each of these audiences?
  - Every researcher has two jobs: to publish novel research and to review and interpret the research of others. They're both critical components of publicly funded science, but every researcher (myself included) learns early on that they operate in a system where there is a massive pressure to publish and minimal incentive to review. Our goal is to bring some balance back to the system.
  - For researchers, that means formal recognition, rewards, training, and ways to engage with articles post-publication. There is growing demand for these services.
  - For publishers, we integrate into the editorial management system and make it easy to provide recognition and an engaging experience. We also provide a dashboard which gives insight into reviewers on Publons and will eventually be a way to find under-represented reviewers and reduce workload on over-burdened reviewers.
  - Institutions are really interested in anything that helps them to get a more complete picture of their research outputs and contributions to society. Publons is really the first way for them to count those peer review activities.
  - We believe that this approach is part of what will be required to bring back a balance to publishing and reviewing incentives and therefore increases the quality of not just peer review, but articles themselves.
- Andrew: are any institutions or funding bodies using Publons as a major part of their grant/tenure award process?
  - We have a pilot in place with the University of Queensland but our focus right now is on working in partnership with publishers to build a more efficient review process.
  - That said, a lot of our users already include their records in performance reviews. There is, I feel, a misconception that institutions and funders don't care about review, when in actual fact contributions to the research environment are already factored into performance based funding. Of course funders can (and we believe should) put more weight on these contributions. Historically, the main challenge has been in measuring these contributions. Our thesis is that making this information more accessible will allow funding bodies to put additional weight on it in the future -- and that this is a good thing for the research community.

- Andrew: to what extent do publishers already participate in Publons? i.e. what are the options for them to support / integrate with it?
  - We have hundreds of integrated journals on Publons from many different [publishing partners](#). During the review process, reviewers are given the option to get recognition on Publons. If a reviewer opts in, we provide a publisher-branded recognition experience. We've seen speed up the review process and publishers are now using Publons as a basis for their reviewer services initiatives.
  - We also have a dashboard that gives editors and journal managers a great deal of insight into their reviewers and the review process. One of the key features is the ability to measure reviewer workload across the journals the review for and to identify reviewers who might be better placed to review more.
- Some publishers are concerned by the way Publons makes reviews available without the permission of the author or journal involved, given that publishers will often have contracted with authors not to publish such reviews.
  - Andrew: do you get this feedback directly from researchers themselves? How do you address it if so? (And how common is it?)
    - First of all, I should say that we've put a lot of effort into getting our permissions system right in a way that is good for **\*research\***, and will continue to do so. Reviews are never published until the manuscript is made public and at that point we factor in reviewer, author, and journal preferences. As a result only about 6% of our reviews are published (22% are signed by the reviewer). Readers who want some background on our thinking should consult [this post](#) on our blog.
    - To give you an idea of the numbers, we give authors the ability to choose whether they want to allow reviews of their manuscripts published: about 49% default to an unpublished setting, but for specific articles only about 17% choose to block publication. This is consistent with our internal surveys where about 35% of authors say they would have "no problem" if reviews of their manuscripts were published and a further 40% say "it would depend on the review".
    - It's also worth noting that about 50% of reviewers say they choose not to publish their reviews out of concern that the author or editor would object. It seems to me that the system is closed mostly because we are all worried that other people want it to be closed.
    - On the flip side, we've had plenty of complaints from researchers who think we should be more open. It just goes to show how diverse (and strong) opinions are in our industry, which is a good thing. We'd have bigger problems if people didn't care about what we were doing.
  - Andrew: if publishers raise this concern with you, do you remove reviews? what's the process here, and how often is it invoked?
    - We don't remove reviews completely as then it would be impossible for reviewers to get credit. Instead we blind those reviews either at the journal or publisher level.

- Publishers or journals are able to set a site-wide policy about whether reviews can be signed or published. Any journal can set a policy through their dashboard or by contacting us. There is no cost and you don't have to be a formal partner. We've added policies that cover thousands of journals so it's a pretty standard thing for us at this point. If you are a publisher you can learn more at: <https://publons.com/partner/>
- David: Has SAGE had this concern? If not, why not? Or if you do have this concern, do you have a vision for how Publons could evolve to acknowledge / address it?
  - First of all, let me be clear that Sage will ALWAYS defer to the scholars who edit our journals, the researchers who publish in them, and the reviewers who evaluate submissions. If any of those stakeholders prefer to keep reviews confidential or anonymous, then Sage will agree. That being said, I'd like to make a few comments about peer review. I think increased transparency and less anonymity and confidentiality is good for scientific discourse and research. I understand the need for anonymity and/or confidentiality of reviews in some cases, e.g., the case where a junior scholar is reviewing the work of a senior scholar who might exercise influence over the junior scholar's job or funding prospects. However, I would like anonymity or confidentiality to be the exception, not the rule. I believe that the quality of reviews would go up if they were published. To be sure, public reviews would probably take longer to write than hidden ones. It is already hard to entice enough scholars to do the ever increasing number of reviews required to keep up with the ever growing stream of scholarly research. But this is precisely why Publons is necessary. If scholars get credit for the work they put into reviews, then they might be more incentivized to participate in the review process. My hope is for a world with ever more research, evaluated by ever more scholars, in an ever more open and transparent way. Anything that increases the amount and transparency of scientific discourse is a good thing. Publons does that. That is why I wanted to encourage and invest in Publons.
- Publishers are often wary of using each other's services, and I imagine the sensitivities here could be higher for something as critical as peer review - people are nervous of other publishers being able to look into their acceptance decisions or submission rates. Even a minority investment from one publisher could derail Publons' cross-publisher viability.
  - Andrew: Are these valid concerns? (does Publons require full access to journal submissions systems?)
    - First of all, I'll reiterate what we wrote in our [blog about the SAGE announcement](#): Publons remains completely publisher-neutral and SAGE has no operational involvement. This is a minority deal and we did it because it is clear that David and SAGE buy into our vision. We would

- not have proceeded with the deal if we had any concerns about neutrality as our ability to affect our mission depends on it!
- Furthermore, we are open to investment interest from other publishers so long as they agree to the same neutrality and mission-oriented terms as SAGE.
- David: if these examples aren't realistic, are there other valid concerns that publishers might have about SAGE's involvement that might undermine the cross-publisher proposition?
    - I want to emphasize the importance of Publons' publisher neutrality. Sage is a minority investor, one of several. We have no operational involvement. To be sure, Sage is currently the only strategic investor, i.e., the only investor in the publishing industry. That may not always be the case; we would be happy if Publons attracted other strategic investors.
    - Sage neither gets nor provides preferential treatment in its customer relationship with Publons. I make no attempt to influence anyone at Sage to become a customer of Publons. If Publons can convince Sage executives that there is an advantage to working with Publons, then great. If not, well, then Sage will not be a customer. That is entirely up to the operational executives at Sage and I will make no attempt to influence their thinking.
  - David: If so, are there ways to mitigate this risk?
    - We have openly and clearly discussed the necessity for a firewall between operational or customer information from other Publons partners and Sage. Sage does not have access to any customer data that is not publicly available on the Publons website.
    - I have signed a personal non-disclosure agreement with Publons. Though it has not yet occurred, we on the Publons board have discussed the possibility that I may have to recuse myself if ever information comes up at a board meeting that even remotely feels like it could jeopardize our publisher neutrality. If any potential customers are at all nervous about this issue, please get in touch with me directly. I will be happy to explain our thinking on this in greater detail.
  - David: some commentators will assume that Publons' acceptance of a strategic investor at this stage of their development will limit their future financing options. Can you comment from the perspective of someone who from time to time provides such financing, whether through investment or acquisition? i.e. if you were interested in buying a small company, what would be the implications of another industry player owning a minority stake? (would you question why that player was not buying out the company itself? would it affect valuation? etc)
    - Sage -- and I personally -- would like to encourage ever more scholarly research and ever more pedagogy. We hope to encourage the creation, evaluation and dissemination of more research and more teaching. Any business that gets more good research or teaching in front of more

human beings is attractive to us. Indeed we hope we can do more investments of this sort in the future.

- We are not a pure financial investor since we are more interested in impact on the scholarly enterprise than purely return to investors. Keep in mind that Sage itself has no investors who are not fully committed to education. We are not a public company. We have no private equity investors. We are a very small, close group of education zealots.
- That being said, we believe that free-market capitalism is a powerful force for innovation. The founders of the companies in which we invest have a right to create the highest valuation they can. We encourage that thinking.
- When we make a minority investment, we can imagine any of three outcomes:
  - Failure: The startup never reaches the point of being a sustainable, cash-flow positive business and no potential buyers appear. This sometimes happens with innovative investments. There is nothing to do but shrug, write off the investment, and find a new investment.
  - Moderate Success: The company is sustainable and attractive to Sage or other potential buyers. If the founders want to exit, Sage and others may bid on the outstanding shares. If we were to bid, we'd hope that Sage would be willing to pay more than any other potential buyer and thus become the sole owner, but our minority stake would not affect the outcome.
  - Huge Success: The company is so successful that when the founders want to exit, Sage simply cannot afford to pay as much as some other potential buyer. Sage will encourage the highest possible valuation and will encourage such a sale, even if that sale is to one of our larger competitors. We will simply cash out along with the founders.
- The most important point is that Sage will not try to inhibit the founders in realizing their maximum return upon their exit.
- Sage brings some of the advantages of a strategic investor -- industry knowledge and contacts, and a long time horizon. We combine that with some of the advantages of a financial investor since we're willing to take a minority stake and help founders to achieve their goals, because we believe in those goals.