

Matters Arising**Letter to the Editor regarding: Systemic bias in author-suggested reviewer selection undermines editorial integrity**Emmanuel O. Fenibo¹

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To the Editor,

The practice of allowing author-suggested reviewers has become a key feature of modern scholarly publishing, with about 61% of academic journals and publishers using this approach in their editorial process (Hamilton et al., 2020). Its continued use is mainly practical. Editors face rising submission numbers, decreasing reviewer pools, and widespread reviewer fatigue. In this environment, allowing authors to recommend potential reviewers is a workable way to speed up reviewer selection, reduce editorial delays, and ensure reviewers have the right expertise for the manuscript. Authors are often familiar with specialists in their subfield and can identify individuals capable of evaluating advanced methodologies, datasets, or analytical frameworks. In this way, the model helps address real logistical challenges in maintaining an efficient peer-review system.

In marine engineering, the author-suggestion model of peer review carries particularly acute risks because the discipline is both highly specialised and structurally interconnected. The community of experts in areas such as offshore structural integrity, naval architecture, hydrodynamic modelling, marine propulsion systems, corrosion engineering, and subsea infrastructure is comparatively small. Professional relationships often span academia, shipyards, classification societies, maritime regulators, equipment manufacturers, and multinational research consortia. In such an ecosystem, intellectual proximity and professional overlap are not exceptions; they are structural features of the field. Within this tightly networked environment, authors are more likely to recommend reviewers drawn from familiar professional circles: former collaborators, colleagues from shipbuilding firms, partners within joint industry projects, or technical experts affiliated with classification bodies and regulatory advisory panels. Even in the absence of intentional favouritism, these relational ties can generate implicit conflicts of interest and shared cognitive frameworks that soften critical scrutiny. When reviewers operate within the same industrial, methodological, or regulatory paradigms as the authors, they may be less inclined to rigorously challenge foundational assumptions, modelling simplifications, validation procedures, or risk assessments.

The consequences extend beyond theoretical bias. Marine engineering research frequently underpins high-stakes applications: hull structural reliability analyses, fatigue life predictions for offshore platforms, dynamic positioning systems, ballast water treatment technologies, autonomous vessel navigation algorithms, and decarbonisation strategies for maritime transport. If peer review fails to rigorously interrogate potential design flaws, safety limitations, scalability constraints, or environmental impact assessments, overly favourable evaluations may allow methodological weaknesses to pass into the published record. Such weaknesses can then be cited, operationalised, or embedded into engineering standards, procurement decisions, and regulatory guidance.

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Because marine engineering scholarship often feeds directly into industrial implementation and policy formation, compromised peer review has consequences that transcend academic discourse. Biased evaluations may delay disruptive innovation by favouring established design philosophies over emerging alternatives. Conversely, insufficiently critical reviews may accelerate the adoption of technologies whose safety margins or environmental performance are inadequately validated. In both scenarios, the ripple effects extend into vessel safety standards, offshore energy infrastructure, port operations, and marine environmental protection regimes.

The stakes are therefore amplified relative to more purely theoretical disciplines. Peer review in marine engineering is not merely a gatekeeping mechanism for publication. It functions as a quasi-regulatory filter, indirectly influencing technical standards and operational safety. Where reviewer selection is shaped by author nominations without robust safeguards for independence, the risk is not merely reputational; it is structural and material. Ensuring impartial, diverse, and independently vetted reviewer panels is thus integral not only to scholarly integrity but to the reliability, safety, and sustainability of real-world maritime systems.

Case studies from broader scientific publishing illustrate these risks. A large-scale analysis of the neuroscience section of *PLOS ONE* demonstrated that author-suggested reviewers consistently made more favourable recommendations than editor-selected reviewers, raising concerns about inflated acceptance rates and compromised objectivity (Acuna et al., 2022). Similarly, investigations into peer review practices in engineering journals have highlighted how conflicts of interest, such as reviewers with prior collaborations or commercial ties, undermine the credibility of the process (Wager, 2014). These findings are directly relevant to marine engineering, where industrial partnerships are common, and research outcomes often have immediate regulatory and safety implications. If biased reviews lead to the publication of inadequately scrutinised work, the consequences could include unsafe vessel designs, weakened environmental safeguards, and erosion of trust in scholarly publishing within the maritime sector.

To uphold scientific rigour and equitable representation while still permitting authors to propose reviewers to rapidly identify subject-matter experts, editorial systems must be structurally balanced.

Author suggestions should serve as supplementary input, not as the primary mechanism for reviewer selection. At a minimum, every manuscript should be evaluated by a majority of independently editor-selected reviewers to preserve objectivity and prevent undue influence arising from professional proximity. For scalability and operational efficiency, journals can institutionalise this balance by developing a structured, continuously updated reviewer database. Such a database should classify experts by precise technical specialisation (e.g., offshore structural mechanics, marine propulsion optimisation, corrosion science, coastal infrastructure resilience), geographic region, institutional affiliation, and career stage. This taxonomy would enable editors to rapidly cross-reference author-suggested names against a broader independent pool, ensuring diversity of perspective and reducing reliance on concentrated academic or industrial networks.

Robust conflict-of-interest safeguards must be mandatory, not optional. All proposed reviewers, whether nominated by authors or selected by editors, should fill out standardized disclosure forms that identify prior co-authorship within a specific time frame, shared institutional affiliations, joint grant funding, advisory roles, consultancy relationships, or commercial interests. Any reviewer with recent collaboration history, financial ties, or supervisory relationships with the authors should be disqualified. Clear, enforceable thresholds for disqualification enhance both procedural fairness and public trust. To streamline operations without sacrificing integrity, AI-assisted reviewer recommendation systems can be responsibly incorporated into editorial workflows. Properly configured tools can analyze publication networks, citation patterns, and collaboration histories to automatically detect potential conflicts and suggest alternative reviewers outside the authors' immediate professional circles. Rather than replacing editorial judgment, these systems should support it by flagging proximity risks, increasing reviewer diversity, and easing administrative workload amid rising submission volumes.

Transparency mechanisms are equally essential. Journals can enhance credibility by periodically publishing anonymised statistics detailing the proportion of author-suggested versus editor-selected reviewers, comparative acceptance rates, and turnaround times. In addition, scheduled internal audits of reviewer recommendations and outcomes can help detect systematic bias, unusually high concordance rates, or patterns of preferential acceptance. These audits need not expose individual

identities but should evaluate structural trends to ensure continuous quality assurance. By embedding these safeguards into formal editorial policy, journals can pragmatically retain the logistical benefits of author-suggested reviewers, speed, technical alignment, and reduced reviewer-search friction, while safeguarding impartiality.

This letter presents a balanced, transparent, and technology-assisted framework that enables journals to scale efficiently as submission volumes increase without compromising fairness, independence, or scholarly credibility.

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