

Researching the History of Research Integrity

Heather Ellis
(University of Sheffield)

Earlier, we heard about multiple definitions of 'excellence' in contemporary research assessment processes.

How much more must this be the case when we think about how the quality of 'research' was judged in the past?

Q: Is it possible to study ideas about research integrity in history?

The answer to this depends, in the first instance, on what we understand the term 'research' to mean.



- ◊ We probably have a fairly clear understanding of what we mean by ‘research’ today but is ‘research’ a stable category that can be examined comparatively across different periods of time?
- ◊ Can we arrive at a transhistorical definition of research as a human activity that has always taken place e.g. OED: ‘a careful study of a subject, especially in order to discover new facts or information about it.’ We may compare this with the definition given in Samuel Johnson’s dictionary of 1768: ‘A close examination of or inquiry into a specific subject.’
- ◊ While the word ‘research’ itself may have retained a relatively stable meaning, we must still pay close attention to how the term is used in particular historical contexts (Shapin 1994; Lubenow, 2015).

The specific focus of my research are the literary and philosophical societies which emerged as a new type of learned society in the later part of the 18th century and spread all across the country by the early 1840s.

Although traditionally viewed more as sites of sociability without serious knowledge-making ambitions, I argue that 'research', understood in the terms listed above was a key part of their activities.

Writing in the *Quarterly Review* in 1826, the geologist Charles Lyell described the literary and philosophical societies as institutions dedicated to the 'advancement' of the 'various arts and sciences' and to the carrying out of 'profound research.'



On the AFFINITY subsisting between the ARTS, with a PLAN for promoting and extending MANUFACTURES, by ENCOURAGING THOSE ARTS, on which MANUFACTURES principally depend. By THOMAS BARNES, D. D. Read January 9, 1782.

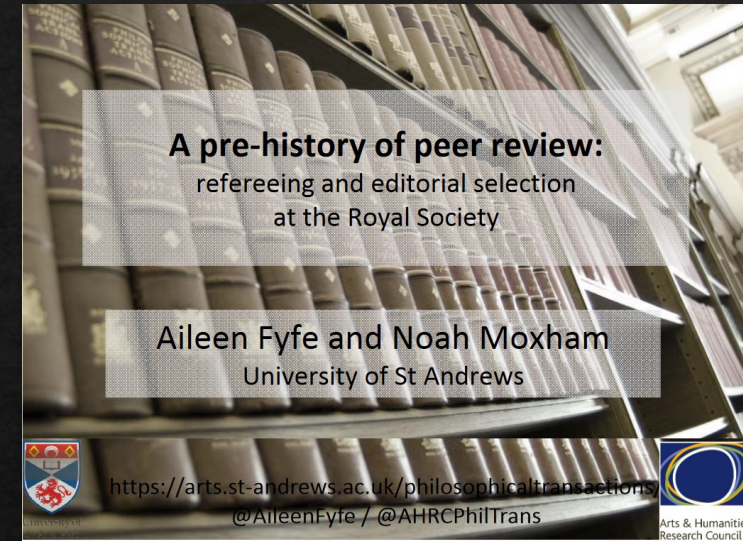
He, who can thus diversify his pursuits, keeps up the spring and energy of his powers, the ardour of his studies, the keennels of his research. He borrows ideas, images, illustrations, from kindred sciences. His mind widens with increasing knowledge. He sees every subject, as it were, in a larger field of vision. He views it round, in a greater variety of aspects. His soul is expanded, his judgment strengthened, and all his powers assisted, and improved.

On the Advantages of LITERATURE and PHILOSOPHY in general, and especially on the consistency of LITERARY and PHILOSOPHICAL with COMMERCIAL PURSUITS. By THOMAS HENRY, F. R. S. Read October 3, 1781.

But it may be said, that all men are not intended by nature for scholars or philosophers; and that there are stations in life that will not admit of profound study and investigation. Yet there are few, whose minds may not receive a bias to some useful research, whereby they may be pleasingly and usefully employed. And we may

If research exists and can be studied in the past, what about research integrity? What about the process of assessing the reliability, credibility, significance and ‘excellence’ of research? Language is important but here we can also look at material practices, what William Clark has called the ‘little tools of knowledge’.

Here, the work of Aileen Fyfe and Noah Moxham on the pre-history of peer review at the Royal Society is instructive. In looking at the refereeing process from the early nineteenth century to the present day, they stress the instability of the purpose of such practices over time.



“The epistemic purpose of refereeing underwent a transformation, from a public foil to set off and amplify the very best of the research received by the Society in the early nineteenth century to an instrument for ensuring the application of minimum thresholds of quality across the board while allocating space (and therefore resources and prestige) on the basis of expert assessment” (Fyfe & Moxham, 2016: 23)

We see something similar if we look at the literary and philosophical societies.

When the Liverpool Lit and Phil started printing its transactions in 1845, it explicitly rejected the notion of selecting some papers and excluding others on the basis of their greater scientific validity.

In explaining the decision to print some papers in full and others only in abstract, the Council made clear that this was done with a view to rendering little known subjects and rare sources more accessible to the reader rather than as a sign of their inherent accuracy or integrity.

‘In the compilation of this volume’, they wrote,

the Council have been guided by the principle that original communications, or those obtained from sources not generally accessible, demanded a larger space to be devoted to them than papers which were derived from works known to the literary and scientific reader, however great the research and ability might be, displayed in the latter...’

- ◇ This is not to say that assessing the reliability, accuracy and credibility of truth claims was not part of the work of these societies.
- ◇ However, it is important to realise that ‘integrity’ was conceived not merely as a disembodied ‘epistemic virtue’ but rather as a profoundly embodied quality, manifested in the personal character and ‘integrity’ of the researcher involved.

III. That every Candidate for admission into the Society, whether as an Ordinary or Honorary Member, shall be proposed by at least three Ordinary Members,

who shall sign a Certificate of his being, from their knowledge of him, or of his writings, a fit person to be admitted into it: which certificate shall be read at four successive meetings of the Society, previously to the election—Such election, with respect to an Ordinary Member,

'Integrity' as a vital feature of the idealised scholarly persona

But though URBANITY, according to the most liberal interpretation of that term, was the *characteristic* of our excellent colleague, he possessed other endowments, of more intrinsic value. And I could enlarge, with pleasure, on his nice sense of rectitude, his inviolable integrity, and sacred regard to truth. These moral virtues were, in him, founded on no fictitious principle of *honour*, but resulted from the constitution of his mind; and were strengthened by habit, regulated by reason, and sanctioned by religion.

Essay reflecting on the life and character of Charles de Polier, 1785 (Memoirs of the Literary and Philosophical Society of Manchester Vol. II)