The Moving Criterion: Sequential Justification Shifts in Scientific Access Moderation

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Abstract

Scientific moderation is typically framed as a process based on explicit, actionable criteria that enable revision. This paper identifies a recurrent pattern, termed *sequential justification shift*, in which initial, localized feedback is followed by broader or non-actionable justifications. Across documented cases from preprint platforms, evaluation moves from correctable issues to global judgments, external constraints, or non-revisable assessments of contribution.

These shifts remove any clear path to compliance while preserving the appearance of procedural responsiveness. We interpret this dynamic as a process-level mechanism of *quiet exclusion*, in which interaction persists but does not lead to resolution or completion. Exclusion thus arises not only through explicit rejection, but through post-engagement changes in evaluative criteria that prevent convergence.

1 Introduction

Quiet exclusion is not simply the absence of acceptance, nor the presence of rejection. It is a process in which interaction persists while the conditions required for completion are progressively removed. Participation therefore remains formally possible, yet convergence becomes unattainable (Morin, 2026).

Scientific dissemination platforms are generally presented as operating through explicit and actionable criteria. Submissions are evaluated against identifiable standards, and authors are expected to revise their work to achieve compliance. Moderation is therefore implicitly modeled as a convergent process in which feedback progressively reduces discrepancies between the submission and platform expectations.

However, some moderation sequences do not follow this structure. Initial feedback may identify localized and potentially correctable issues, such as formatting, methodological clarity, or content concerns. After the author engages with these issues, subsequent decisions may introduce broader, structurally different, or non-actionable justifications. What initially appears to be a solvable problem space then becomes one in which no stable path to compliance exists.

This paper examines such sequences as a distinct process pattern, termed *sequential justification shift*. The pattern can be formalized as a transition across evaluative states:

1. An initial problem space defined by local and correctable criteria.
2. Author engagement under an assumption of convergence.
3. Subsequent reconfiguration toward global, external, or non-actionable criteria.
4. Resulting loss of convergence.

At this stage, no sequence of revisions can satisfy the shifting criteria. Failure to reach acceptance therefore reflects a change in the evaluative framework itself, rather than only properties of the submission. The process resembles an optimization system in which the objective function changes across iterations, preventing convergence.

The focus of this study is not rejection as an outcome, but the evolution of evaluative criteria after author engagement. We analyze documented cases from preprint moderation contexts involving shifts from local to global evaluation, from internal content assessment to external constraints, and from correctable issues to non-revisable judgments of contribution. In some instances, the criteria invoked depend on inaccessible or unresolved external states.

The aim of this study is to characterize the dynamics of these shifts and their implications for scientific access. The analysis suggests that exclusion may arise not only through explicit rejection, but through post-engagement changes in evaluative criteria that eliminate any stable pathway to compliance (Barbour, 2017; Tennant et al., 2019; Morin, 2026).

2 Method

2.1 Design

This study adopts a qualitative, process-level case analysis. The objective is not to estimate prevalence, but to identify and characterize a recurrent structural pattern in moderation sequences, termed *sequential justification shift*. The analysis focuses on the temporal evolution of evaluative criteria within individual moderation processes.

2.2 Data Sources

The analysis is based on documented moderation interactions from preprint platforms, including:

- moderation messages and decisions,
- appeal responses,
- publicly available platform policies (e.g., FAQs),
- archived correspondence and interface outputs.

All materials were generated in the course of real submission and moderation processes. Where necessary, sequences were reconstructed from contemporaneous records. Wording was preserved where available and standardized minimally for clarity.

2.3 Case Selection

Cases were selected based on the presence of:

- at least two sequential justifications within a single moderation process,
- a change in the type or scope of evaluative criteria,
- sufficient documentation to reconstruct the sequence of interaction.

Two cases meeting these criteria are presented. They are treated as analytical instances rather than representative samples.

2.4 Analytical Framework

The analysis applies a process-tracing approach, focusing on transitions between evaluative states. Each case is decomposed into stages:

- initial feedback,
- author response or compliance effort,

- subsequent justification(s),
- terminal decision.

Each justification is classified according to its type:

- local vs global,
- internal (content-based) vs external (administrative),
- correctable vs non-correctable,
- verifiable vs non-verifiable.

A *sequential justification shift* is identified when the process moves from a correctable to a non-correctable or non-actionable evaluative space after author engagement.

2.5 Anonymization and Representation

To preserve anonymity and focus on structural features, moderation sequences are presented as reconstructed textual figures rather than direct screenshots. Identifying details are removed, and platform-specific references are limited to what is necessary for interpretation. Statements are reproduced verbatim where available. Source materials (including interface captures and correspondence) were archived by the author and can be made available for verification.

2.6 Case 1: From Local Feedback to Appeal-Stage Closure

Case 1 illustrates a sequential justification shift extending across the full interaction, including an appeal stage. The process begins with localized, potentially correctable feedback, followed by a global decision, and culminates in an appeal-stage response that reframes the evaluation while explicitly excluding revision.

Stage 1: Initial localized feedback
Formatting issues, including font or presentation inconsistencies.
Methodological description insufficiently specified.
Concern regarding possible AI-generated content.

Stage 2: Author response
The submission was revised and clarified in response to the identified issues.

Stage 3: Final decision
"Does not meet standards of scholarly communication."

Stage 4: Author appeal
Request for clarification and identification of specific criteria.

Stage 5: Appeal-stage response
The paper "does not ask or answer a question that is outstanding in the research literature," presents no empirical evidence, is "not minimally informative," and does not sufficiently engage with research. The response further states that the platform does not conduct revise-and-resubmit processes and is not requesting revision.

Figure 1: Case 1. Sequential justification shift from localized feedback to global evaluation, followed by appeal-stage reframing and procedural closure.

Analysis. The sequence begins within a solvable problem space defined by localized and potentially correctable issues. The initial feedback suggests that revision may lead to compliance. However, the final decision introduces a global and non-specific criterion that does not identify remaining actionable elements.

The appeal stage does not stabilize the evaluative process. Rather, it introduces broader criteria concerning contribution, empirical support, and engagement with the research literature. These differ from the initial feedback in both scope and function, and are not articulated as revisable conditions.

The explicit exclusion of revise-and-resubmit procedures produces a terminal state. Additional explanation does not increase actionability, but instead consolidates the decision while removing any remaining pathway to compliance. The process therefore exhibits a full transition from correctable feedback to non-actionable closure across stages.

2.7 Case 2: External Criterion Based on an Unavailable Referent

Case 2 illustrates a sequential justification shift in which an initial internal criterion is followed by an external administrative constraint that depends on an inaccessible resource.

Stage 1: Initial justification (internal criterion)
"The substantive content appears to rely on AI-generated content."

Stage 2: Secondary justification (external criterion)
"The submission has already been uploaded to another preprint archive and has an associated DOI, making it unsuitable for this archive."

Figure 2: Case 2. Shift from an internal, content-based justification to an external administrative constraint.

Additional context. The external justification refers to a prior preprint hosted on another platform. At the time of evaluation, the referenced document was not publicly accessible due to a prior access restriction affecting the same corpus (Morin, 2026). The criterion therefore relies on a referent that is not available for inspection or engagement.

Analysis. This sequence exhibits a shift from an internal, content-based criterion to an external administrative condition. While the initial justification concerns properties of the submission and is, in principle, open to revision, the subsequent justification introduces a constraint that cannot be addressed through modification of the manuscript.

The evaluative frame therefore changes from a potentially solvable problem space to one defined by structural conditions external to the submission. This transition removes any clear pathway to compliance.

The shift is further amplified by the fact that the external criterion depends on a referent that is not accessible at the time of evaluation. As a result, the condition is not only non-correctable, but also non-verifiable from the author's perspective. The evaluation thus relies on a constrained external state rather than on properties of the submission itself.

3 Discussion

The cases analyzed in this paper show that moderation outcomes may be shaped not only by the content of submissions, but by the dynamics through which evaluative criteria evolve over time. Rather than converging toward a stable and actionable standard, the processes examined here exhibit sequential shifts that progressively reduce the possibility of compliance.

In Case 1, the process begins within a clearly defined problem space, where localized issues suggest a path to revision. This expectation is subsequently disrupted by a global judgment that does not specify remaining deficiencies, and further reinforced at the appeal stage by the introduction of contribution-based criteria combined with an explicit closure of revision pathways. The result is a transition from correctable feedback to procedural finality.

In Case 2, the shift operates across a different dimension, moving from an internal, content-based criterion to an external administrative constraint. This transition redefines the evaluative frame in terms of conditions that cannot be addressed through modification of the submission. The situation is further compounded by the reliance on a referent that is not accessible at the time of evaluation, introducing a non-verifiable element into the decision process.

Taken together, these cases suggest that sequential justification shifts can operate along multiple axes, including scope (local vs global), domain (internal vs external), and actionability (correctable vs non-correctable). Despite these variations, a common feature is the loss of a stable problem space. Authors initially engage with feedback under the assumption that revision may lead to acceptance, but subsequent shifts in criteria remove any clear pathway to convergence.

An important implication is that additional explanation does not necessarily increase transparency in a functional sense. While later-stage responses may provide more detailed reasoning, they can also consolidate heterogeneous criteria without restoring actionability. In such cases, explanation serves to justify the outcome rather than to guide revision.

These findings extend the notion of exclusion in scientific systems beyond explicit rejection. Exclusion may arise through processes that remain formally interactive, yet do not support progression toward completion. This highlights the importance of distinguishing between the presence of feedback and the existence of a stable, actionable evaluative framework.

From a design perspective, moderation systems that aim to support open scientific access may benefit from maintaining continuity in evaluative criteria across stages, or from clearly distinguishing between revisable and non-revisable grounds at the outset. This would help preserve a coherent problem space and reduce the likelihood of post-engagement criterion shifts that prevent resolution.

The present study is limited to a small number of cases and does not address prevalence. Future work could examine whether similar patterns occur across a broader range of platforms and contexts, and whether they are associated with specific institutional constraints or moderation practices.

4 Conclusion

This paper identifies a recurrent process pattern in scientific moderation, termed *sequential justification shift*, in which evaluative criteria change after author engagement. Across documented cases, initial feedback defines a potentially solvable problem space, but subsequent justifications introduce broader, external, or non-actionable conditions that remove any clear pathway to compliance.

The findings show that exclusion in scientific systems does not rely solely on explicit rejection. It can emerge through dynamic shifts in evaluation that preserve the appearance of interaction while preventing convergence. This highlights the importance of distinguishing between feedback that enables revision and processes that reconfigure criteria after engagement.

Understanding these dynamics is essential for assessing how access is effectively regulated in open scientific infrastructures.

References

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