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**Abstract**

The demand for greater public accountability is changing the nature of ex ante peer review at public science agencies worldwide. Based on a four year research project, this essay examines these changes through an analysis of the process of grant proposal review at two US public science agencies, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the National Science Foundation (NSF). Weaving historical and conceptual narratives with analytical accounts, we describe the ways in which these two agencies struggle with the question of incorporating considerations of societal impact into the process of peer review. We use this comparative analysis to draw two main conclusions. First, evaluation of broader societal impacts is not different in kind from evaluation of intellectual merit. Second, the scientific community may actually bolster its autonomy by taking a broader range of considerations into its peer review processes. (HRK / Abstract übernommen)