Editors’ Ethical Decision Making

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Peer review of manuscripts by external experts before publication is one fundamental mechanism that is used to ensure high-quality publications.

Aside from publishing high-quality and accurate information and correcting published literature as required, scientific journal editors are charged with maintaining the highest ethical standards during the entire manuscript–peer-review process. Editors’ responsibilities toward authors, reviewers, and readers are outlined in CSE’s White Paper on Promoting Integrity in Scientific Journals, 2009 Update1 and other references.2

The goal of this column is to provoke thought on five stages of the peer review of manuscripts, each of which requires decision making involving substantial ethical issues but is usually not considered in detail from a process perspective:

• Conducting editorial review before peer review.
• Assigning appropriate peer reviewers.
• Establishing and maintaining an ethical peer-review process.
• Making an editorial decision.
• Reconsidering editorial decisions.

To manage high submission rates and avoid overloading peer reviewers, in-house editorial staff should review incoming manuscripts before forwarding them to external peer reviewers. This “prereview” streamlines the peer-review process and encourages efficient use of the external peer reviewers’ time. A staff decision not to move forward with peer review of a manuscript “should be made in a fair and unbiased way”3 and should be based on commonly applied criteria, such as whether a manuscript is outside the journal’s scope or lacks originality.1,2 In cases of early rejection, editors and their in-house editorial staff should explain to authors why a manuscript was rejected and how it could be strengthened. When applicable, they should also suggest journals that may be a better fit for the manuscript.

If a manuscript is selected to be sent to external peer reviewers, it is the responsibility of the journal editor to assign “appropriate” reviewers, that is, experts within the field addressed by the manuscript who have no disqualifying conflicts of interest.4 Identifying the right peer reviewers for a given manuscript while taking into consideration well-supported requests from authors to exclude specific reviewers is a crucial editorial decision. It may happen that peer reviewers, although declaring that they have no disqualifying conflicts of interest, are competitors of a manuscript’s authors; this could lead to biased critiques. Editors should take such peer-reviewer misconduct seriously.1 Peer reviewers should “express their views clearly with supporting arguments and references as necessary”,4 but a number of factors, including simple lack of time, may lead to poorly written and documented reviews. In such circumstances, editors should critically consider the reports of all the reviewers of a given manuscript1 and balance their recommendations against each other or even solicit another reviewer for an added opinion, if necessary. Editors should ask peer reviewers who provide poorly written reports for additional comments or clarification and, when possible, avoid using them in the future.5

When peer reviewers are selected, they should be asked directly to disclose possible conflicts of interest; this allows the editor to assess the likelihood of bias. Because peer reviewers are often experts in the field covered by a manuscript, they may favor rejection of a competitor’s manuscript for nonscientific reasons. Of course, that is ethically unacceptable. The responsibility of the editor to identify the “appropriate” peer reviewers for a manuscript includes foreseeing such potential conflicts and also critically evaluating peer-reviewers’ reports with this potential misconduct in mind.

In addition, journals should instruct peer reviewers on the confidential nature of their assignment. The question remains as to which tools and processes editors have at hand to control confidentiality during peer review and to ensure that reviewers “do not make any use of the work described in the manuscript or take advantage of the knowledge they gained by reviewing it before publication”.3

Editors will assign a number of peer reviewers per manuscript and make an editorial decision that is based on the advice of the reviewers combined with in-house editorial views. Editorial decisions should be communicated in a “clear and constructive” manner.3 From an ethical standpoint, it is important for an editor to provide a rationale to the authors that explains the editorial decision. Consider the following scenarios. First, if all peer reviewers recommend publication, does this necessarily mean that the manuscript should be published? Given the number of retractions of published manuscripts,5 which in most cases were recommended for publication by peer reviewers and editors, it appears that answer is no. However, how can the peer-review process be modified to allow accurate detection of falsified data and observations? Second, if all peer reviewers recommend rejection, does this necessarily mean that the manuscript should be rejected? Sometimes, a manuscript is accepted by another journal that has a similar impact factor and scope as the journal by which it was rejected after review by another set of peer reviewers. Third, peer-reviewers’ opinions may conflict. How do editors reach an editorial decision in such cases? Particularly in the latter situation, it may be helpful to share reviewers’ comments among all the reviewers of a given manuscript before an editorial decision has been reached. Reviewers would then have a chance to compare their own views with those of the other reviewers and together provide a more informed opinion to the editor. In some cases, editors may also want
to assign another reviewer to gain additional thoughts. If a reviewed manuscript is to be rejected after due consideration, the journal should express clearly the reasons for the manuscript’s rejection and what changes, if any, could be made to render the manuscript potentially acceptable for publication.

Authors whose manuscripts are rejected, before or after peer review, may want to offer a rebuttal to the editorial decision. Authors’ rebuttals to editorial decisions should be handled by the editor seriously and discreetly. In some cases, a manuscript’s rejection results in a well-documented and well-reasoned rebuttal by the authors. The original peer reviewers may be reluctant or unable to reconsider the manuscript fairly in light of such a rebuttal. To resolve such a case, a journal may opt to assign an ombudsperson to evaluate the manuscript, its reviews, and the rebuttal to reach an appropriate editorial decision.

The section “Roles and Responsibilities in Publishing” in the CSE’s White Paper (pages 2–38) offers many useful guidelines on key responsibilities of authors, reviewers, editors, and readers and cross-references to sample correspondence and workflows that can be used to address and resolve some of the issues related to peer review discussed here. The above discussion warrants additional changes in the peer-review process used to evaluate scientific manuscripts. To improve ethics in scientific publishing, it may be necessary to make such changes as encouraging editors to document the rationale for their decision regarding a given manuscript; sharing peer reviewers’ comments among reviewers before an editorial decision is reached; supplementing initial reviews with additional reviews as needed; not accepting poorly written and poorly documented peer reviewers’ reports; carefully monitoring for conflicts of interest in the peer-review process; and setting up independent ombudsperson committees that have authority to review authors’ rebuttals. This may not, however, be an overnight task, inasmuch as it puts even more pressure and workload on the shoulders of editors who are already greatly stressed for various other reasons.

References

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