

◆ The Journal Editor and the Publishing Organization: What Do They Owe Each Other?

Many editors around the world reacted quickly to the news of Dr Lundberg's dismissal. The most prominent reactions for me were protests of the American Medical Association (AMA) action among members of the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME) posted in WAME's e-mail network. In essence, they condemned the AMA for "attacking" or "destroying" editorial independence. How many of these editors were aware only of the "oral sex" article as the reason for the dismissal and did not know of the AMA press release's reference to the other unspecified matters I could not guess. But their reactions were understandable. These editors pride themselves on the right to decide what to publish and what not to publish. They see this right as the governing principle for an editor's functions and will always feel compelled to defend it. They may have had other concerns. If the editor of a major medical journal who had served for 17 years could be suddenly dismissed, how safe were their own positions? I do think editors, in reacting to the episode, must keep in mind that "editorial independence" can never be absolute, can never permit an editor to publish anything he or she wishes. Completely unbridled "independence", if abused in relation to an organization's aim for its journal, could be a disaster for it.

I do not aim here to come to judgments on this episode. It can, however, serve as an opportunity to dissect out relevant issues and how such episodes might be avoided. CBE could take it as an opportunity to consider developing guidelines for both publishers and their editors that could reduce the risk of clashes of this kind, either on questions of "independence" or on other matters.

What actions of an editor may lead an organization publishing a scientific journal to conclude that the editor is not properly serving its interests? What protection from unsatisfactory editorial conduct might an organization ask for? On the other end, what actions of an organization can lead its editor to conclude that he or she is not being allowed to serve the editorial func-

tions with adequate independence and support? What protection from such interference could an editor or editor-candidate ask for? The essence of what is needed for a workable and mutually satisfying relation between an editor and the publishing organization is an agreement, a contract (not in the legal sense), a covenant between them when the editor is appointed. It could be a verbal agreement but, in my view, should be written. It would define what the organization both expects and does not want from its editor; it would define what the

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In my experience, few if any editors or editor-candidates or appointing organizations have asked for such an agreement. Many publishing organizations, especially scientific societies, probably know well the candidate's character and abilities through his or her high prominence in the organization's field and see little or no reason for potential conflict. On the editor's side, the candidate is likely to be naive about potential problems unless he or she has served on the journal's editorial board before becoming a candidate and may not even think of a risk of a future conflict. Editors not committing themselves full-time to the post are usually appointed for a relatively short and fixed term, perhaps 5 to 7 years; any misgivings of the editor or the organization about their relationship, if any develop, are likely to be a problem for only a short time.

What questions might such an agreement respond to? Here are some an editor or editor-candidate might raise:

- What are the aims of the organization in publishing the journal, both scientific and financial?

- What is to be the topical scope of the journal during my editorship?
- What topics would be out of scope?
- Will I, my editorial associates, my editorial board, and my peer reviewers have the right to make final decisions on what to publish and what not to publish?
- Will the organization publishing the journal defend this editorial independence against attacks by its individual members?
- Will the organization allow me to participate in decisions on practical matters, such as quality of paper and suitable design of pages?
- Will the organization allow me to publish scientific papers without interference from advertisers or potential advertisers?
- To whom am I responsible for the journal—who is appointing me? The organization's management? The organization's governing body, such as a board of trustees or a board of directors? The organization's publications committee? (The corollary question, of course, is, Who can dismiss me?)
- If the organization concludes at any point that as editor I am not having the journal serve the organization's defined aims properly or am leaving the defined limits, will it inform me of that conclusion?
- If the organization and I disagree on the conclusion, what mechanism does the organization promise to put into effect for an attempt at a resolution between us?
- Will the organization provide material support—such as an adequate budget for staff, peer reviewing, computer facilities, and a Web site—to enable the journal to develop and maintain an esteemed position in its scientific community?

In addition to those questions, a candidate will, of course, wish to know the terms of employment in such matters as commitment of time in the post, salary or "honorarium", additional benefits, term of appointment, and other personal details.

What questions might the organization wish to pose to the editor-candidate for an

agreement? Here are possibilities:

- Will you serve as editor so as to meet our aims for the scope and character of the journal?
- Will you use all standard methods—such as peer reviewing, statistical consultation, and required author revisions—to maintain an adequate scientific standard for the journal?
- In publishing potentially controversial papers, will you give persons with opposing views a voice in the journal through invited commentaries, editorials, and letters?
- Will you keep us informed of complaints about the journal's content from organization members to assist us in defense of the editor's independence?
- Will you keep us informed of what you regard as inadequate support for the journal's functions?

That is not necessarily a complete set of questions.

The publishing organization, in the strict sense, may of course be a commercial firm publishing the journal entirely for its own interests or as a service to a scientific society. In these cases the questions suggested above could be a starting point for drafting additional questions or could be divided between the firm and the society.

Presumably such questions could be posed in writing by both parties, but I believe the organization should draft the first version of an agreement; it will probably always initiate an approach to an editor-candidate. What if the first draft does not satisfy the candidate? Or the second draft by the editor is respected by the organization's officers?

The method I like for resolving conflicting positions is what I call "seeking consensus through convergence"; it could be more simply called "negotiation". This analytic and tactical method is simple in design, although applying it may take much time and patience, perhaps even involvement of a third party. Each party defines an extreme of conduct with regard to a particular question. One extreme is seen by one party as

likely to serve its needs best; the other party then defines the extreme that it sees as serving its needs best. Operating rules for each party in these two extremes are laid out. Then each party states its objections to such rules, indicating how they undermine their own needs in the relationship. Then each

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party works to move away from the hypothetical extreme position that it has defined as serving its needs and toward compromise with the other party. The two parties reiterate the process again and again, coming closer and closer to agreement with each step; their positions converge. Eventually, they come to a consensus that defines the rules for how they relate to each other. This consensus is then represented, preferably by a written agreement.

This process may seem too complex, too laborious, to parties that think they can

readily come to an oral agreement. And, as I have suggested, it may not be needed by candidates for appointments for relatively short terms. But if the organization, even if small, is known for its political tensions and potential turmoil, the candidate should press for the suggested process and an eventual written agreement.

Whether CBE wishes to have its Editorial Policy Committee or an ad hoc committee draft a guidelines document that could guide candidates and organizations in coming to an agreement on their future relations is not up to me. I do feel, however, that we should take such a step toward an effort of this kind. Both editors and their organizations have a stake in supporting open, informative, responsible scientific publishing and its associated dialogues. They should be able to agree on how this is to be done.

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