

A Question of Review

A peer-reviewed journal published a book review. The book's author believed that the review contained an unsupported statement that greatly harmed his reputation. The statement in question was that the author's main point was already known and published in the literature; the author held that even a cursory look at the book and the literature would show this not to be the case. The author asked to be allowed to write a short reply to the review; the editor responded that the journal did not allow such replies by authors. The author then asked the editor to have the reviewer substantiate the statement in a private letter to the editor and the author; the reviewer refused that option. The author then asked the editor to publish a letter to the editor in which he could write a rebuttal to the reviewer's statement on the grounds that leaving the review unchallenged in the public record was damaging. The editor refused, saying that the Letters to the Editor column was not designed to include this kind of correspondence, that is, rebuttal of a published book review. The editor did not respond to further telephone calls or letters from this author. Does the author have a justified issue with the editor?

Solutions

This author does have a justified issue with the editor who refused to allow any reply to a negative comment in a book review. Especially because book reviews do not undergo peer review, there is always the possibility that a reviewer will, intentionally or not, err in his or her assessment of the book. As a former managing editor of a medical journal, I can understand why the editor did not want to start a "reply" column as a precedent for authors to argue with book reviewers. I do not understand why the reviewer did not wish to substantiate the statement made in the book review, but a generous interpretation would be that time constraints prevented the reviewer from providing a full explanation.

However, I think a letter to the editor would provide the perfect venue for addressing this kind of conflict. First, it

would appear in the same publication, and therefore before the same audience, as did the review. Second, it would allow the book reviewer to reply to the letter to the editor if he or she wished to do so. Third, it would provide a more balanced presentation of the controversial statements, thereby preserving the good will of both the author (and colleagues and friends) and the reviewer.

Although the Letters to the Editor column may not have been designed for this kind of correspondence, professional flexibility should allow it. According to the presentation of the problem, the editor was unreasonable in cutting off all communication with an author who was trying to find a suitable compromise to remedy what the author saw as damage to his reputation. I believe that most editors would and should take this situation quite seriously and work with the author (and the reviewer) to find such a compromise. I'd be very interested to read any reasoning that supports the editor's actions!

Elizabeth Whalen

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In the tradition of open communication among scientists, it would have been desirable for the editor to allow the book's author to publish a letter to the editor.

The editors of many journals would have had the flexibility to bend the rules to allow this, although probably some editors' hands are tied by their publishers.

D'Ann Finley

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The author definitely has an "issue" with this journal and its policies, particularly in that the reviewer has refused to substantiate the statements in the review in a private letter to the editor and book author. Why?

At that point in the process, it would have been politic for the editor to consult with an impartial third-party expert in the field as to whether the material in the book

The situations described as new questions in this column are not necessarily based on actual situations, and the ones that are may have been modified to focus the question. Send your responses to the new question to Della Mundy, Department of Medical Editing, Kaiser Foundation Research Institute, 1800 Harrison Street, 16th Floor, Oakland CA 94712-3429. Telephone 510-987-3573; fax 510-873-5131; e-mail della.mundy@kp.org.

was already known and published. If the reviewer's premise was correct, the author could be notified of the relevant citations. However, if the reviewer's statement was not supported, I think that it would be fitting to publish a brief letter from the book's author challenging the reviewer's assertions (and noting that the reviewer had declined to reply). Given that book reviews are generally exempt from peer review, a letter to the editor pointing out a factual error in a review would be just as appropriate as one commenting on a peer-reviewed article.

Case descriptions are sketchy, and I'd really like to know a few more details:

- Is there a general disclaimer that all material published reflects only the opinions of authors and not the editor, publisher, and so on?
- Has a policy been formulated as to what constitutes an acceptable letter to the editor and book review in this journal? Has it been communicated to the readers and authors (for example, in the instructions for authors published in the journal)?
- Does the editor who assigns books for review look for impartiality or controversy when choosing reviewers? What instructions are given to reviewers when a book review is requested? Are references allowed?

- Although book reviews are admittedly opinion pieces, does anyone in the editorial office read them for content or accuracy before they are sent off to the copyeditor?
- What are the personalities of those involved (for example, is the reviewer prone to hyperbole, or is it feared that the author would make the private letter public)?

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New Question:

A Question of Testing

A recently appointed journal editor is thinking of giving applicants for some staff positions a test in copyediting and proofreading, and she wishes to identify appropriate tests. How would you suggest that the editor find or develop such a test? What issues, if any, should she consider with regard to giving such tests?