

Should an Editor or Peer Reviewer be Openly Acknowledged?

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ABSTRACT

Professional services cost money and time. There is a silenced understanding in the scientific publishing community that editors and peer reviewers should not be acknowledged and that these services constitute an integral part of the publishing process, but whose services are never publically acknowledged. I challenge this traditional way of thinking and offer a conspiracy theory as to why such a rule exists.

Keywords: hypothesis, open access, publishing fees

SHOULD AN EDITOR OR PEER BE OPENLY ACKNOWLEDGED?

Whenever we submit a manuscript to a scientific journal, there is the inherent expectation that the quality will be checked by the editor and editor-in-chief as well as by peer reviewers. The most likely scenario, except for top-tier journals in a field of study is that the process always falls way short of expectations. And with the rapid rise in open access predatory publishing and vanity publishing, coupled with the pressure to publish more and faster, all sugar-coated in the age of hyper-everything and instant gratification, more often than not driven by the financial aspirations of commercial publishers, it is no wonder that there is an exponential increase in the number of papers that are being published that should most likely never have been published. In such cases, the editor, peer reviewer(s) and publisher have dismally failed their responsibilities towards the authors, towards science and towards society.

In order to address the main issue of this paper, it is imperative to touch on several key aspects related to the peer review process.

In my view, there are five types of peer review: 1) Open, in which the authors, editors and peers are all aware of each other). In this case, maximum transparency is exercised but the risks of conflicts of interest are also maximum. 2) Semi-open, in which only the editors and authors are aware of each other, but the authors are not aware of the peer reviewers, although the peer reviewers are aware of the authors. This is most likely the most common form of peer review as exercised by journals published by academic societies and by commercial publishers. 3) Semi-blind, in which the authors' identity (name and affiliation) is kept secret from the peer reviewers and in which the authors do not know the peer reviewer's identity involved. Cases 2) and 3) would theoretically allow for maximum transparency with the least conflicts of interest. 4) Total-blind, in which only the editor-in-chief, journal or publisher knows the full identity of both authors and peers. In this case, the higher authority delegates to a lower authority (e.g., an editor) to handle the peer review process anonymously, without knowing the identity of all parties at all. Although the process would thoroughly eliminate conflicts of interest, the level of transparency is considerably reduced, which could lead to peer manipulation or other fraudulent practices. 5) Hyperbolically blind, in which the editor and peer reviewers' names are published in the manuscript after acceptance. Although this would maximize transparency, it could be subject to personal attacks or accusations of bias or

conflicts of interest by third parties who might find associations between authors and editors and/or reviewers. Type 5 would eliminate the need for acknowledging the editor or peer reviewer and would increase the role and responsibility of all players, as well as the pro-active participation of the scientific community. It could also curb the activity of predatory publishers who conduct no peer review, although this is still a far way off without an international publishing watchdog. Global Science Books (GSB) also practices the type 2) of peer review process for two reasons which we believe to be better than the other types: firstly, the authors can assign responsibility to a defined editor, almost always the editor-in-chief while the peer reviewers can remain anonymous without potential retribution (for example in the case of a rejection); secondly, the peers have an opportunity of conducting back-ground checks on the authors and their work, either for testing for plagiarism, or for simply check-ing background research by that same group of authors.

Within this context of peer review and editing, the editor and peer reviewer are expected, as part of their "contract" with science, or in cases where the editor or peer are being paid by a commercial publisher, for example, to provide their maximum and level best assessment of the scientific quality of a manuscript. This would include looking at aspects such as scientific soundness, experimental design, experimental logic and execution soundness, congruency of data within the results and suitability of methods of presentation, either as text descriptions, or visual representation in tables or figures. Other aspects such as language, punctuation, structure and sectioning, journal style and reference style are all part and parcel of the responsibility of the editor and peer reviewer, although the extent of the responsibilities will differ from person to person, journal to journal and publisher to publisher. In most cases, language and journal style are the full responsibility of the authors.

What is quite fascinating, in the case of most publishers, is that these services are free of charge. Free of charge to the authors (except for language and style), and free of charge with respect to editors and peer reviewers. A close examination of the current publishing model that is most commonly used (whether traditional or open access) will reveal that in fact there is minimum, or no, investment by the publisher in most likely the most important aspect of the publishing process – except for the author's data set – the peer review and editing process. Yet, even if the publisher does not pay editors and reviewers, there is the expectation that these individuals should perform *par excellence*. This is truly hypocritical, especially in the day and age of capitalism

where efforts are monetarily rewarded. Within this climate of “free” services, one must then doubt the effort made by editors or peers to ensure the highest possible quality of the peer review process to ensure the best quality science being published.

With respect to peer review and editorial quality, three cases emerge. Case 1: Often, as would be expected, useful comments and suggestions are provided, either by the editor-in-chief, editor or peer reviewers, which are then used by the authors to make improvements to the manuscript. Case 2: On occasion, some editors or peer reviewers provide a substantially large amount of assistance to many aspects of the manuscript, or a large volume of suggestions that would result in major improvements to the paper content and style. Case 3: However, on the opposite of the scale, and as indicated above, with a rapid increase in fraudulent and predatory publishing – particularly open access – and particularly in cases where the publisher does not remunerate the editors or peer reviewers, the possibility of having no “peer” review or very superficial “peer” review is high.

When we observe a published paper, for example a current issue, it is always possible to observe who the current editor is, although the peer reviewers remain anonymous. The anonymity of peer reviewers remains true even for back-issues. However, if we observe a back-issue of a journal, let’s say 5 or 15 years ago, particularly on the web-site, there is almost no visibility of the editorial board and editor-in-chief at that time, even if several individuals were involved in the success of that journal or publisher at that time. I am of the opinion that this is not only unfair and unjust, it is incorrect.

Now that a small back-ground has been established, a key issue remains. Should editors and/or peer reviewer in case 1 and 2, but particularly case 2, be acknowledged in the acknowledgement section? Or, where the author has failed to address the publisher’s requirements, and where the editor has personally made up for those weaknesses on behalf of the authors, should that editor be acknowledged? This is a tricky topic and is not dealt with in the mainstream literature, for fairly obvious reasons. However, most main-stream publishers tend to not acknowledge editors and peer reviewers in the acknowledgement section. Partially because the peer review process is most often semi-open or semi-blind and thus the publisher does not reveal (or does not want to reveal) the identity of the peer reviewers involved. Ironically, the very same publishers will often state in their definitions of authorship and attribution of responsibilities, as part of the instructions for authors, that any person or entity that provides substantial support to any aspect of the research or writing of the paper should be acknowledged. This places the logic of anonymous, uncredited peer review at odds with authorship and acknowledgement guidelines. Such publishers should be challenged and the “culture” of incongruent rules and regulations should be adjusted to suit a real publishing scenario.

At GSB, we are of the opinion that where authors fail to fulfill their requirements, and if such errors or misses are major, then the editor in charge should be publically acknowledged. Also, where editors have been involved in improving tables or figures, due acknowledgement is provided.

For one simple reason. It is fair to do so because such duties fall to the way side of an editor’s regular duties. This initiative started in 2011 and was formally implemented in 2012. Although on occasion such acknowledgement has been attributed, at GSB, peer reviewers have never been acknowledged by authors simply because the peer review process is not open.

There is one conspiracy theory that I wish to float within this paper regarding this issue. I am of the opinion that the large commercial publishers instilled or initiated this “culture” of free peer reviewer and editorial service so as to save costs. The business logic would be that the publisher would essentially be receiving free labor potentially by tens or hundreds of thousands of skilled workers for ensuring the best academic quality. In a capitalistic society, particularly where we are talking about for-profit commercial publishers, this would be a level of abuse of the work force even worse than slavery. In any advanced country, a skilled person providing a professional service would be remunerated. Moreover, any company, in a developed country, who does not remunerate skilled labor would be defying labor laws and would be deemed illegal. Yet, incredibly, it is assumed to be common-place and acceptable in science publishing. This is, in my view, the greatest abuse of a labor force since the Industrial Revolution. A second part of my conspiracy theory exists. The psychological aspect, which relates to social charity. The publishers have, as part of the psychological campaign, managed to convince the academic community that it is honorable and befitting to serve the community for free. They have literally brain-washed the community into believing that if you edit or peer review manuscripts for free (remember always that this is for a for-profit commercial publisher), that this is somehow the noble thing to do for science. Once again, incredibly, the scientific community has bought into this psychology and now standardized trend. I lend considerable credence to this conspiracy theory and call on major publishers to prove otherwise. I also call on the scientific community (authors, editors and reviewers) to demand better rights. Otherwise science may be renegaded to the level of clothes factory-level in Bangladesh run by big international corporations (the commercial publishers). Through a Jeffersonian prism, it is almost as if slavery (in this case free editing and peer review) can be rationalized or manipulated by deviating the focus from the core issue (slavery) and pushing it onto peripheral issues, such as the “honour” to serve the scientific community and science.

It is important to note that the rules implemented by one publisher should never be imposed on another publisher, directly or indirectly. Moreover, peer reviewers or editors who work for multiple publishers, freely or in a paid contract, should never expect different publishers to have the same rationale, rules or *modus operandii*.

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