



Research Article

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Challenges for the Academic Editor in the Scientific Publication

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Abstract

The academic editor has been, and still is, the gatekeeper of peer-reviewed scientific publications, by being whom, ultimately, defines whether or not a manuscript can be published. At a time of profound transformation in the context of scientific publication (digital publishing, open access, preprint, open peer review,...) and the expectations, inside and outside academia, towards academic publication, this perspective paper aims to add to the discussion of the (re)formulation of the academic editor's role, considering that he or she, in this panoply of changes, continues, and will continue to be, the ultimate guardian of the scientific quality of what is published.

Keywords: academic editor, scholarly publication, scientific publication, scholarly communication.

The editor of an academic journal, despite doing it pro bono, represents (or at least should represent) one of the most important positions for influencing one's own community, particularly when it comes to the most contemporary research topics. (Herteliu, Ausloos, Ileanu, Rotundo, & Andrei, 2017, p. 1)

1. Introduction

We live in a moment of profound transformation of the context (digital publishing, open access, preprint, open peer review,...) and expectations (inside and outside academia) towards the academic publication (Ghanbari Baghestan et al., 2019). Baffy et al. (2020) maintain that “Scholarly communication is being transformed by complex digital tools such as online access, social media, and big data management” (p. 27). This is a context in which “The current discourse on research productivity (how much peer-reviewed academic output is published by faculty) is dominated by quantitative research on individual and institutional traits; implicit assumptions are that academic writing is a predominately cognitive activity, and that lack of productivity represents some kind of deficiency” (Nygaard, 2017, p. 519).

The academic editor has been, and still is, the gatekeeper of peer-reviewed scientific publications, by being who, ultimately, defines whether or not a manuscript can be published, functioning as a direct agent for legitimising the scientific publication (Primack et al., 2019; Herteliu et al., 2017; Watson & Xue, 2019). This paper aims to add to the discussion of the (re)formulation of the academic editor’s role.

2. The academic editor and the scientific publication

The pressure to publish – the already famous *publish or perish* (Chiriboga, 2019) – is felt with enormous urgency in the academic world, with the profound implications of publishing in the image of both academics and higher education institutions, in a world where global competition is already a reality (Omer, 2015). According to Abbott (2019), “This new pressure arises from essential changes at the heart of academic life” (p. 10).

The context of scientific publication – which is critical for the dissemination of scientific knowledge (Wong, 2019; Baffy et al., 2020) –, while being an industry with an annual turnover of millions of dollars and euros in one year (Pagliaro, 2019; Banks et al., 2018; Kortabarria, 2019), is undergoing a deep change (Trapp, 2019) with the unstoppable Open Access (Ghanbari Baghestan et al., 2019; Tenopir et al., 2016; Miguel, Tannuri de Oliveira, & Cabrini Grácio, 2016; Baffy et al., 2020; Kortabarria, 2019). Six dimensions may be highlighted on this important phenomenon – as an illustration, and without being exhaustive, but that can be developed by consulting the literature on this topic –, which academic editors will have to address, as depicted in Table 1.

Table 1. Challenges for academic publishers

Open Access	Free access to scientific publications
Indexing	The indexation of journals to the most reputable bases
Metrics	The number of citations of the articles
Practitioner impact	The impact on applied science
Preprint	Publication without prior peer review
Social impact	Online references, e.g. on social networks
Mega-journals	Covers a very large number of topics
Decolonisation	De-centring scientific quality from the Anglophilic centre

Source: Own production, based on Tennant et al., 2019; Herteliu et al., 2017; Baffy et al., 2020; Gammelgaard, 2016; Hughes, Stone, Aravopoulou, Tiu Wright, & Machtynger, 2018; Ferreira & Serpa, 2018a; Besançon, Rönnerberg, Löwgren, Tennant, & Cooper, 2019; Xu, 2018; Lemke, Mehrazar, Mazarakis, & Peters, 2019; Wakeling et al., 2017.

In short, academic editors, in their activity, will have to be able to cope in a world of increasing open access dominance, with challenges, such as (i) journal indexing and metrics, measured through the

number of citations per article (Tennant et al., 2019; Herteliu et al., 2017; Baffy et al., 2020; Gammelgaard, 2016); (ii) the increasing pressure for articles to explicitly indicate their “practitioner impact” (Hughes et al., 2018, p. 2); (iii) the growing preprint publication with manuscripts not previously peer-reviewed before being made publicly available (Ferreira & Serpa, 2018a; Besançon et al., 2019; Tennant et al., 2019); (iv) the presence of references of articles in social networks assessed through Altmetrics or similar indicators (Xu, 2018; Lemke et al., 2019); (v) the mega-journals, which have a focus that covers a very large number of topics, such as, for example, humanities and/or social sciences (Wakeling et al., 2017); and, finally, (vi) decolonise the international scientific publication, acknowledging that scientific quality is not present only in the Anglophone centre’s model and language (Banks et al., 2018; Trahar, Juntrasook, Burford, von Kotze, & Wildemeersch, 2019).

Within this context, there may be a temptation to manipulate the ranking results through excessive and unnecessary citation of a given journal’s own publications (Rovira, Codina, Guerrero-Solé, & Lopezosa, 2019; Herteliu et al., 2017), for example, through “coercive citation, review articles, editorials and letters, and online queuing (i.e., the number of articles pre-posted on the web)” (Wilhite, Fong, & Wilhite, 2019, p. 1514).

Even in the above-mentioned situation, where challenges for the academic editor emerge that shape new situations, generating doubts and specific implications, there are values that are essential in the publication of scientific journals, in the respect for ethics standards in publications (Zernes, 2018), such as Honesty, Promptness, Competence, Dependability, Fairness, Accountability and Integrity (Table 2).

Table 2. Some values that are relevant to the publication of scientific journals

Honesty	To act truthfully in all publishing related activities; be consistent with rules
Promptness	To be punctual in meeting all responsibilities
Competence	To accept roles only when capable by education and/or experience
Dependability	To be trustworthy to fulfil obligations of the stakeholder position
Fairness	To be free of bias in decision making
Accountability	Answerable for all responsibilities
Integrity	Adherence to all relevant practices common to journal publishing

Source: McCuen (2017, p. 2).

Perhaps the preprint publication may have increased relevance in scientific communication. According to Pagliaro (2019), “As we enter the third decade of the 21st century, the time has come for world’s scholars to replace journal article ‘submissions’ with a free and open system widely based on freely accessible and freely reproducible preprints in which the value (i.e., quality) of scientific articles no longer needs peer review but is open to the evaluation and use of the whole scientific community which has all the tools and an obvious incentive to separate “wheat from chaff”, identifying quality work for further valorization via subsequent utilization (and citation)” (p. 4).

The open peer review seems to us one of the paths to be developed towards a reformulation of the academic editor’s role and can take on the role of the following (Table 3):

Table 3. Open peer review practices

Practice	Description
Transparent peer review	
Open identities	Authors and reviewers know each other’s identities.
Open reports	Reports are published together with the accepted manuscript.
Open platforms	Review is not organized by the issuing journal, but by another organization.

Practice	Description
<u>Dialogical peer review</u>	
Open participation	All members of the wider community can review an unpublished manuscript.
Open interactions	Direct reciprocal discussion between authors and reviewers is possible and is promoted.
Open pre-review manuscripts	Original manuscripts are made available on preprint servers before the review process begins.
Open final-version commenting	Open commenting on the final manuscript is possible.

Source: Dobusch & Heimstädt, 2019, p. 613. Adapted from Ross-Hellauer (2017).

This is a situation for which there is no easy or unique solution. However, we consider that advertising the identity of the evaluators while the gatekeepers of the legitimacy of scientific publications is an inevitable path to take in order to increase the quality control of the scientific publication (Dobusch & Heimstädt, 2019) and, at the same time, legitimizing the position of the academic editor (Ferreira & Serpa, 2018b).

3. Conclusion

This paper aims to add to the discussion of the (re)formulation of the academic editor's role, considering that this character, in the myriad of changes that the academic and scientific arena are going through, is, and will remain, the ultimate guardian of the scientific quality of what is published and, hence, public.

Even though it is acknowledged that financial interests are present in scientific publishing (Baffy et al., 2020), autonomy in editorial decisions, which can be improved, is a feature and a vital element of integrity in scientific publishing.

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