Essays

Authors' editors in the 21st century: promoters of publication quality and efficiency

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Abstract This article provides an update on the types of work authors' editors are currently involved in, and proposes that authors' editors are well placed to help reduce wastage and inefficiency in the current academic publication system. I describe the factors that contribute to wastage, and then explain how authors' editors can help reduce wastage. To conclude I suggest steps that editors and publishers could also take to improve publication efficiency.

Keywords Authors' editor; research methodology; communication.

Research publication in peer-reviewed journals has become a wasteful process that is more focused on metrics for researcher and journal performance and on profits for commercial publishers than on disseminating information useful for researchers and society.

Many factors contribute to wastage in the current research publishing system. For example, most published articles are never cited. Because of widespread methodological weaknesses and statistical fallacies, a large proportion of published research findings can be considered false.[1] Concerns about the low reproducibility of commercially-funded preclinical cancer studies are another reflection of the wastage caused by methodological and reporting deficiencies.[2] In many disciplines, retractions for misconduct or error are increasing, even at (especially at) journals with high impact factors and presumably rigorous peer review.[3] When post-publication peer review detects problems serious enough to warrant a retraction, the prepublication editorial work is thereby wasted, and additional efforts and resources are needed to correct the record appropriately.

According to Rubriq, peer review for articles that are rejected (almost all manuscripts are rejected by one or more journals before they are accepted) consumes an estimated 15 million person-hours per year.[4] This wastage appears to be caused mainly by a poor initial match between the manuscript's contents and the scope of the journal, and by inefficient peer review that does not help authors to improve the manuscript.

Predatory journals that operate as economic scams disguised (often rather poorly) as legitimate, trustworthy journals are another source of wastage. There is no estimate of the amount of money wasted annually on article processing charges paid to these journals. Nor is there any way to know how many hiring and funding decisions are influenced by mediocre (or even fraudulent) articles published in journals that – regardless of their access policies or economic model – provide little or no constructive feedback from peer reviewers, but are nonetheless taken seriously by promotion and grant committees.[5]

The high costs of the current research publishing system have been denounced in several arenas.[6,7] These costs are borne mostly through public research funding systems and ultimately by taxpayers. Private companies sell the results of publicly-supported research and editorial quality control (ie, products and services that publishers obtain at very little cost) at considerable profit.

Unfortunately, wastage in the current global academic publishing system is likely to worsen before it gets better. This situation has led to increasing skepticism about the sustainability of the current system, along with many calls for alternatives. Early in 2014 a group of experts in biomedical research publishing called on funders, research institutions and publishers to improve "incentives, infrastructure and capacity" to reduce wastage. In Recommendation 1 they suggested that research institutions should employ a publication officer "to improve research outputs, including attention to publication ethics and research integrity, use of reporting guidelines, and development of different publication models such as open access". They proposed that "[e]thics committees and publication officers could also help to ensure that all research methods and results are completely and transparently reported and published".[8]

In Recommendation 3, these experts called for broad-based efforts "to improve the capability and capacity of authors and reviewers to do high-quality and complete reporting", noting that editors and reviewers may not be good at identifying research reports "that are not fit for purpose" because few of them are adequately trained. According to Glasziou and colleagues, authors likewise "have insufficient training in the range of issues related to reporting of research, such as use of reporting guidelines, publication ethics, and research integrity". Training, according to Glasziou and colleagues, should be provided by the academic community through "integrat[ing] the study of research methods, scientific writing and publishing in their curricula", and by publishers, who "could also provide some training to editors, reviewers and authors, specifically in use of reporting guideline and provision of better feedback to reviewers".[8]

Here I suggest that authors' editors (along with translators who also provide authors' editing services) are well placed to support the publication of material that is fit for purpose, and to provide training in many of the areas Glasziou and colleagues identified. At present, authors' editors i) help authors improve what they aim to publish, ii) educate and train researchers in writing and reporting skills, and iii) interact with editors and publishers to suggest ways they could improve their processes for the benefit of researchers and readers. The roles of publication officers suggested by Glasziou and colleagues overlap to a considerable degree with those of authors'

editors,[9-11] academic "language professionals" as characterized by Matarese,[12] and "literacy brokers" as described by Lillis and Curry.[13,14] For example, authors' editors who work with the two AuthorAID projects provide training for researchers in writing and publication skills[15-18] and training for journal editors in best editorial practices.[18,19]

The role of authors' editors has been characterized as that of a facilitator,[10] a catalyst,[20] and a shaper[21] of research publications. These roles have evolved and expanded in the 21st century to include the types of support listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Areas in which authors' editors can help researchers to publish with less wastage

1	Choose the journals most likely to be interested in the research and most likely to provide useful feedback
2	Prepare manuscripts and accompanying documents in accordance with the journals' requirements, and navigate the submittal process
3	Optimize publication strategies by understanding publishers' terms and conditions regarding editorial quality, costs of publication, access, rights retained or lost, embargoes, self-archiving and repositories[22,23]
4	Avoid the pitfalls of plagiarism, self-plagiarism and inaccurate citation
5	Understand their ethical obligations in the publication process
6	Refute unfounded criticisms by reviewers
7	Develop different types of publications for specific audiences and media

In a presentation about problems associated with biomedical research reporting, Moher provided a list of responsibilities for publication officers (Table 2).[24] Most of the tasks in this list could be handled by experienced authors' editors or other language and communication professionals, although some capacity-building activities would additionally require support from higher academic or institutional management.

Table 2. Some proposed responsibilities for publication officers according to Moher[24]

1	Help improve the clarity and transparency of research presentations and manuscripts
2	Develop seminars on how to write to get published – "fit for purpose"
3	Harness existing resources relevant to manuscript preparation and publication, including research integrity, and publication ethics
4	Facilitate internal peer review of journal manuscripts
5	Facilitate a semester-length course on using reporting guidelines when preparing manuscript submissions
6	Facilitate a semester-length course on peer review
7	Provide seminars on issues about publication ethics, research integrity, and the open access movement
8	Provide seminars (every quarter, for example) to the local community on "making sense of science"
9	Ensure whatever efforts are made can be accessed easily and used globally

Authors' editors cannot fix the problems with the current research publishing system alone, but unfortunately opportunities for authors' editors to work together with editors and publishers are limited outside associations such as EASE. What can journals and publishers do to reduce wastage and improve the quality of published research reports? Some ideas are suggested in Table 3.

Table 3. Opportunities for editors and publishers to reduce wastage in the research publishing process

1	Audit your Instructions to Authors to bring them in line with current best editorial practice guidelines, remove contradictions and make the instructions easy for authors to understand and apply
2	Make journal policies, Instructions to Authors and manuscript submittal checklists available in other languages in addition to English
3	Understand that researchers in many settings do not have access to or cannot afford high-quality assistance with the English language or writing
4	Understand the limitations of online manuscript editing services. Most such services are provided by younger people with an academic background in research who may be familiar with the technical terminology but who may be able to correct only basic spelling, grammar and punctuation errors
5	Consider whether the authors, their translator or authors' editor are better able than the reviewers or copyeditor to judge whether the language or writing is fit for purpose[25,26]
6	Understand that western views on some issues in publication ethics such as authorship criteria, self-plagiarism, appropriate citation of sources and conflicts of interest may be difficult for international researchers to understand and apply in their own setting
7	Ensure that editors and reviewers have an appropriate level of competence in core editorial skills[24]
8	Consider whether trust, respect and editorial process quality could be improved by making editors and reviewers more accountable to authors and readers. For example, if reviewers know the authors' identity, authors should know who they are being reviewed by. If authors are required to provide explicit assurances regarding their professional qualifications, subject expertise and right to be named as authors, editors and reviewers should provide authors with similar evidence of their own competencies and ability to perform their editorial tasks to an acceptable level of proficiency[24]

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