
Essays

Editorials and the cascading peer review

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Abstract The article overviews the structure of editorial articles that is important for maintaining the quality of journal editing and publishing. Special attention is paid to properly evaluating reference lists of editorials, avoiding unethical practices of journal self-citations, and boosting impact factors. We have suggested upgrading standards of cascading peer review and publishing editorials after several rounds of rigorous internal and external evaluations

Keywords Editorials; peer review; periodicals as topic; publishing

Editorials are brief overviews or commentaries on a specific topic, which are essential for the overall quality of scientific publishing. These are usually written by the journal editorial and advisory team members, who reflect on selected articles of the same journal or highlight problems of the scientific community.

What distinguishes editorials from other article types is that they do not follow the structure of narrative reviews, original research papers, or letters, and rarely pass the traditional peer review. The editorial team members often evaluate and correct editorial manuscripts in-house, without referring to any external advice or support. Scientific information and points raised in the editorials are not widely explored in the literature, which makes it difficult to find peers who are competent in judging the index manuscript. This last point, however, is inherently linked to the essence of editorials, which are aimed at advancing the scientific discourse by proposing innovative hypotheses and ideas. And for these innovative approaches, it is fair to credit not just the authors, but also the whole editorial team and the publisher of the journal itself.

An editorial article is often solicited and intended for publication in one journal, which may benefit from its successful promotion and citations. In-house science editors or experts evaluating such an article prior to its publication assume that it is not under review elsewhere. Simultaneous dual or multiple journal submission and publication of the same editorial devalue its priority for the periodicals and diminish efforts taken by the editorial teams. Moreover, the practice of targeting more than one publication platforms confuses the Impact Factor calculation since citations to multiple copies of the same editorial are likely to be unevenly distributed, unfairly benefitting some journals at the expense of others.

In the era of ‘big science’, the editorial content attracts considerable attention from readers and authors — potential citers.^{1,2} This is partly due to the readability and ease with which busy authors can ‘catch’ the main points. Besides, publishers and editors of numerous subscription journals willingly open access to the editorials, widening their exposure to the readership and increasing chances of citations. The open-access model for editorials is largely justified because most traditional periodicals still follow the outdated rule of publishing editorial content without complementary extracts, abstracts and keywords, hindering their retrievability through bibliographic databases.

Editorials published by top scholarly journals such as *Nature* and *Science* are perhaps the best examples of concise writing and means of expressing words of wisdom that can change the global science landscape, regardless of subscription and access barriers. A recent study of 1,500 editorials published in *Nature* and *Science* in the past decade revealed fascinating scientific developments, reflected in the logical sequence of the editorial topics.³ Not surprisingly, these editorials attracted much attention and caused the Impact Factors of these journals to soar.

The attractiveness of the exemplary editorials stems primarily from their highly informative titles, which incorporate key messages and provide links between general knowledge and innovative approaches. The plain language of the titles is aimed both at exploring sophisticated, fundamental, or revolutionary research concepts and at paving the way for a range of applied studies. The new terms in such titles often do not match the structured terms in the hierarchy of bibliographic thesauri, warranting revisions of the existing pool of the keywords.

The structure and content of editorials is currently undergoing major changes. The traditional introductory journal articles, or neutral forewords, are gradually being transformed into several article types, though not yet distinguished as such by bibliographic databases. One can easily identify two major types of editorials. The first type, mostly commissioned by publishers, provides complimentary comments on the published research data and strengthens existing points. The second type argues from existing scientific knowledge and proposes completely different points. Both types are well represented in the literature, and make up the system of scholarly debates, known as ‘pros and cons’. Usually, these editorials express the opinions of a limited number of experts (1–3), who are

listed as co-authors. In some cases, when points presented in the editorials are unanimously supported by a large group of experts (such as science editors and journalists), the articles are signed and published on behalf of the publishing journal. The practice of anonymous editorials, however, is not universally acceptable and is not favoured by those who value transparency and authorship credits in science.⁴ The main argument against anonymous editorials is that the readership has the right to know who stands behind the expressed opinions, which either attract or deviate attention, and change the course of scientific progress.^{4,5}

One of the inherent limitations of current scholarly publishing is that the so-called hot topics attract considerable attention; furthermore editorials often cover topics widely discussed by the scientific community.⁶ Opinion pieces in top-tier journals make the topics covered even hotter, especially when the publishers prioritize scholarly discussion and provide unlimited space for all types of articles. Topics of interest to small communities from non-mainstream science countries are rarely discussed and, thus, become even less attractive.

One of the possible ways out of the publication bias is the internationalization of the peer review, with external rather than internal (in-house) evaluation of the editorials. Actually, the internationalization of the peer review started in the 1950s, but since then the move from internal to external evaluations of journal submissions has been slow all over the world.

The internal peer-review is widely employed in the newly launched and small journals, with a limited scope of interest, a small reviewers' pool, and a small audience. Editorials, written by staff members and submitted to these journals, raise concerns about the editorial conflicts of interest, especially when no external reviewer is involved in the review. And these conflicts are rarely disclosed to the public. It would seem that editorial policy of the journals should consider all the instances of editorial conflicts and advise external reviews for all submissions from the journal editors.

The internal peer review may also overlook the excessive journal self-citations in the editorials of the Web of Science-indexed journals, artificially inflating their Impact Factors. Editorial policies should be in place to warn the editorialists against abundant and irrelevant self-citations, which may harm the journals and leave them out of the Journal Citation Report.⁷ The external reviewers may play a critical role by carefully evaluating and suggesting relevant amendments to the reference lists.

Cascading peer review

The latest developments in scholarly publishing and revisions of the existing peer review models have led to cascading journal submissions and publishing them within large publishing consortia. The journals initially rejecting manuscripts now transfer them to the nearest related publishing outlet within the established consortia. The initial results of the evaluation, along with the reviewer's comments, usually follow the rejected manuscript. Such practice allows one to save the consecutive evaluators' time

and efforts by partially or entirely relying on the initial (surrogate) reviewers' comments. Cascading may also apply to unsolicited editorial items, not suitable for one journal, but transferable and acceptable for publication in another related one. In this case, initial internal and external (surrogate) reviewer's comments may help consecutive editors make appropriate decisions. If the editorial is accepted, the efforts of the surrogate reviewers and cascading route of the manuscript should be properly acknowledged. The publishing journal may also inform the readers that the editorial was not commissioned.

Transfer of the reviewers' comments is ethical provided their consent to re-use the comments has been obtained and the authors have agreed to disclose the results of the surrogate review.⁸

Each journal, even within a closely related set of periodicals, has its own scope of interests. Therefore, editorials transmitted to a new journal should not be accepted blindly, based exclusively on comments from a transferring journal.

Cascading manuscripts is becoming widespread with the growth of publishing consortia and the fierce competition between scholarly publishers. Under such conditions it is vital to establish collaborations between the editorial teams, prioritize topics for scientific communities consuming journal information, and choose the best editorial practice, preventing the use of editorials for merely boosting Impact Factors.

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