

EASE-Forum Digest: March to June 2014

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Internal peer review

Bearing in mind that manuscripts are rejected based solely on internal review by editors, Marcin Kozak asked what editors thought about manuscripts' being accepted based on review by (i) only the editor-in-chief or (ii) the editor-in-chief and one or more editorial board members. Editors are, after all, peers, and he was thinking of a scenario where the journal had a large editorial board and the subject matter of the paper was within the editor's/board member's expertise. Any paper that was not, would have as before to be sent out for external review. The advantage of his proposal would be quicker decisions and less reliance on external reviewers, who are often difficult to recruit.

Marcin's proposal did not find favour with Andrew Davis, who argued that whereas the decision of whether to accept a manuscript is the editor's alone, the purpose of reviewing is to identify the best manuscripts; an editor needs reviewers to provide the detailed knowledge to select the best papers and to provide an independent view. Eric Lichtfouse, Marge Berer and Chris Sterken held similar views. At Ivana Štětínová's journal, *Photosynthetica*, all papers were reviewed up to 2009 by two members of the editorial board. The disadvantages had been that reviewers became overloaded with papers to review and overstretched in terms of expertise. The journal now has a number of associate editors who select reviewers.

Andrew wondered if reviewers were harder to find for some subjects than for others as, in his experience, reviewers were not hard to find in entomology and ecology journals. Marcin believed that over the past few years it had become increasingly difficult to recruit reviewers for agriculture, biology and statistics journals. He had also suffered long delays as an author because the editor had been unable to find reviewers for his manuscripts. Helle Goldman estimated that about half of the reviewers *Polar Research* invites to review did not answer, despite the care taken to personalise invitation letters and follow up requests. Sometimes 15 or 20 reviewers needed to be invited before one agreed to review. Nevertheless, unless the paper is an opinion piece or guest editorial, Helle would always want to have at least one external reviewer before acceptance. Aleksandra was curious to know how journals dealt with surplus reviewers, a situation that can arise when invitations are sent to several reviewers and more than two accept the invitation. Helle took the point and gave an example of a reviewer who had been annoyed upon receiving five reviews of the article he or she had reviewed. The reviewer thought getting more than two or three reviewers to assess an article was a waste of reviewers' time: <http://scatter.wordpress.com/2013/07/23/too-many-reviewers/>. Helle therefore invites two or three

reviewers at a time and only extends invitations to others after receiving a refusal or no answer after a couple of weeks.

Concerns were also raised during the discussion about the length of time between submission and publication. Whereas some discussants thought authors should be prepared to wait for an orderly review, Marcin pointed out that in statistics, receiving no response from an editor for 100 days was normal. One editor had first contacted him 200 days after submission to ask him to suggest reviewers. He advised colleagues to be patient for 6 months after submission, but waiting 2-3 years for a paper to be published was certainly not acceptable. Angela Turner agreed and added that she had also found specialists in statistics and maths to be slow at reviewing. Her journal, *Animal Behaviour*, has an average submission-to-decision time of 33 days. It has a board of consulting reviewers who have no duties other than to review papers and have agreed to do so within a week. They are asked to review when the editor has problems finding other reviewers. The editorial office sends regular reports of how long they take to review to the editor who will then ask anyone who consistently fails to review in time to resign. Angela added that authors can also choose to which journals to submit, and it is in the journal's interest to maintain a reputation for reviewing quickly to attract good papers. If there are delays with difficult papers authors should be kept well informed.

Karen Shashok, like Marcin, saw no reason why an editor or board member who had the requisite expertise could not be considered a peer and therefore a reviewer. Being a board member should not make a person ineligible for peer review. She felt, however, that journals should make authors aware of their reviewing policies and in the interests of transparency authors should be told if the paper has been reviewed by an editor or board member, especially if a reviewer's conflict of interest or bias are concerns.

Reviewer fatigue

There was another discussion started by Helle who asked if other editors were experiencing problems finding reviewers. Eric said that his journal was and he thought that the paradox of authors wanting their papers published quickly but being unprepared to spend time reviewing might be because paper evaluation is not taken into account in scientists' promotions. The exceptions to reviewer reluctance that he had seen were when the paper was short, concise and of high quality, and when the journal had a high impact factor (IF). He quoted one reviewer as saying "I do not evaluate papers for IF lower than 3". Marge also had problems recruiting reviewers. She saw this as a sign of people's being overloaded. Life is generally getting harder, and more and more papers are being published.

Moratoriums on submissions

Helle asked whether anyone had heard of a scientific journal placing a moratorium on submissions to enable the editors and other staff to work through a backlog of manuscripts.

Some members of the forum said that they had, including Andrew who thought it was a sign of bad organisation; journals usually manipulated their rejection rate to avoid backlogs.

Paul's copyediting macros

Paul Beverly is a credit to the EASE forum. He has put together a book on macros that are useful for copyediting and proofreading (see <http://blog.sfep.org.uk/>), which is available to download free of charge at <http://www.archivepub.co.uk/TheBook>. He has also written a chapter for the EASE Science Editor's Handbook explaining his macros titled 'Increasing your editing efficiency by using macros' (<http://www.ease.org.uk/publications/science-editors-handbook>). Paul keeps the forum updated on macros that are new in the book or have had significant improvements made to them. This quarter's postings have included, 'My citation checking system is still nowhere near as powerful as Paul Sensecall's Reference Checker, but it's quite a bit better than it was, producing far fewer false positives' (Macro: CitationListChecker) and 'If you're fed up with Word's Symbol font, I have now developed a macro that strips through a Word file, replacing every single

Symbol font character by its unicode equivalent.' (Macro: SymbolToUnicode). He has also radically looked at his spell-checking macros, SpellAlyse, SpellAutoCorrect etc., and replaced them with: SpellingToolkit and ProperNounAlyse; the former offers a range of spelling speed-ups for the different ways you might want to work, and the latter alerts you to all sorts of spelling variations in proper nouns. Other macros include ones that launch words/phrases from Word into Google and OUP's dictionary, ones that launch text into Google Translate and thesaurus.com and dictionary.com, and one that checks and corrects the formatting of the names, initials and dates of the references in either Harvard or Vancouver reference lists (Macros: GoogleTranslate, ThesaurusFetch, DictionaryFetch, AuthorDateFormatter).

Elise Langdon-Neuner (compiler)

a.a.neuner@gmail.com

Discussion initiators

Marcin Kozak: nyggus@gmail.com

Helle Goldman: goldman@npolar.no

Photos from Split

Clockwise: the team from The Lancet; a spot of tidal advertising; conference delegates before dinner

