Somebody has to do or, at least, say something

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Over the last fifteen years of e-publication, scientific publication has seen important improvements regarding information production, storage, sorting, access, and retrieval. These improvements have blurred long recognised distinctions between reader, author, editor, and publisher. Actually, e-publishing is now raising serious concerns about knowledge aggregation, archiving, license ownership, digital rights, science marketing, and monopolistic control; these need to be looked into very carefully and receive firm responses at the highest levels. Concurrently, at the basic author level, one issue of concern is manuscript preparation/submission that is becoming a time-consuming, thus expensive, burden.

First, let us examine the section "Author Guidelines". Some journals have kept these guidelines to the minimum required for a decent manuscript presentation, whereas an ever increasing number of journals (or publishers) display too many instruction pages. Commonly, 30 pages or more fail to end with a brief and useful checklist. For a meticulous author, building this checklist is a tedious task that takes a couple of hours. Besides, due to successive careless compilations of versions, amendments, and supplements, these recommendations become badly organised and even contradictory (eg section order or maximum length). In addition, numerous recommendations are not in line with the requirements of the online submission system (section sizes, table insertions, content of the main manuscript, etc)! Furthermore, some recommendations regarding the figures (file formats and final dimensions and designations) are exaggerated (given the risk of rejection), whereas other recommendations on author affiliations are simply unacceptable ("cut" or "translate into English"): i) most original names of European research organisations are quite understandable; ii) authors are often not entitled to translate the official names of their organisations; and, iii) various translation may distort and multiply organisation names, creating confusion. Lastly, in many instances, a few pages after "the Journal follows the Uniform Requirements…", one finds several journal-specific recommendations regarding, for example, the presentation or punctuation of the references.

Second, let us examine the electronic submission system(s). All authors agree that these systems may speed and secure the submission process, but this does not seem to be always the case. A number of systems are still slow, cumbersome, repetitive, looping, or unevenly responsive. Given the high risk of manuscript rejection, why do authors have to spend hours typing full details on affiliations, sources of funding, or numerous contributors? Is it to fill out a journal's or publisher's address book (sometimes for interest-based advertising purposes)? It goes without saying that conflicting details, given months apart or by distinct authors, may cause system blockage and require desperate attempts of correction. On some, fortunately rare occasions, the corresponding author is asked to resubmit using journal-standardised file names, which is clearly a useless and time-consuming sophistication. Sometimes, editors or associate editors reject a manuscript but propose to transfer it to another "more suitable" journal. Weeks after agreement on this transfer, an author may find that the transfer was not made and that a complete submission should be made anew to the second journal. An even more unpleasant practice is asking for an immediate payment, at the time of the submission, for a mere examination of a paper before its rapid rejection.

All in all, before any manuscript review by some journals, the authors have to take care of nearly everything and abide by a great number of instructions: i) journal-specific article size, structure, style, and formatting rules that go up to hyper-specific typesetting tasks (pre-formatted templates to fill in); ii) submission-system-specific requirements (filenames, figure sizes to the nearest millimeter, etc); and, iii) pay for "online services". In other words, the authors have to bear the larger part of handling, formatting, typesetting, printing, and archiving works and costs, whereas some journals apply only cosmetic changes. In its "full-option version", this situation has led to leaving all the work to the authors and the reviewers or, even worse, publishing unaltered (and possibly unreviewed) articles.

Why complicate simple things? Journal recommendations may well be restricted to a simple checklist of items and a light and simple page layout that facilitate the first reading of a manuscript. More refinement may be required after manuscript acceptance for publication. Similarly, the submission systems may well be restricted to a simple loading of a complete manuscript: author details on detachable pages, then text, references, tables, and figures in a readable/printable format. No extra author energy should be spent on useless formatting and submission details before formal manuscript acceptance. As everyone knows, "time is money", and money is the hardest thing to find in a researcher's life.

Since formatting and submission still require energy, patience, time, and money, one could, without seeming outdated, find oneself thinking: "Blessed was the time when the corresponding author had only to slip three photocopies into an envelope then seal, address, stamp, and mail it in less than three minutes".

Competing interests

The author declares having no financial or non-financial competing interests in relation with this publication. He has no relationships with editorial associations, commercial editing companies, or other organisations that might have an interest in the submission of this viewpoint.