

EASE-Forum Digest: December 2018 – March 2019

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In this forum digest I concentrate on two interesting topics that caught the imagination of the forum and elicited long discussions.

Duplicate publication: is the date of submission or acceptance critical for priority?

Pippa Smart set out the following scenario concerning an article that had been published in three journals:

Journal A received the article on 10 November 2012, accepted it on 31 December 2012 and printed on 1 June 2013.

Journal B received the article on 6 May 2013, accepted it on 11 January 2014 and published it online on 31 January 2014.

Journal C received the article on 9 October 2012, accepted it on 17 November 2012 and published it online on 27 January 2014.

She asked whether every journal should retract the article or only journals A and B. She considered journal C, which received the manuscript first, was the one where it should be published because the unethical action of the author was to submit it to three journals at the same. Ana Marušić agreed that journal C took priority and pointed to a recent publication on duplicate publication (<http://biochemia-medica.com/en/journal/29/1/10.11613/BM.2019.010201>). Michel Ducharme agreed too but argued that the date of acceptance was the critical one because at that point a contract between the author and publisher was clinched, which the author had breached with journal C by failing to withdraw the manuscript before submitting it to journal B. Against this Josephine Sciortino contended the contract was made on submission because at that point the author made an offer which the journal accepted when it agreed to review. Michel saw her argument but considered the contract was conditional on acceptance for publication and became effective on the date of acceptance.

Another view put forward was that the article should be retracted by all three journals because of the authors' unethical behavior. Andrew Davis and John Loadman proposed the journals follow the procedure recommended by COPE. The editors of the three journals should ask the authors for an explanation. If no or an insufficient answer was received then the editors should issue a retraction notice and inform the authors and their institutions. Tom Babor had had a similar case where his and another journal had retracted an article because they found the authors' explanation that they had forgotten was not credible.

Suggestions were also made that the authors should be educated about best practices and their other published papers should be investigated to establish if they regularly made multiple submissions resulting in duplicate publications.

The poor quality of academic writing: who is to blame, what can be done?

Sylwia Ufnalska initiated a long discussion when she explained that institutions in Poland were required to call for tenders for editing and translation services. The result was either cheap poor-quality translation and editing or researchers forced to use private funds for quality services. Was this a problem in other countries too? It was also a huge problem in Finland, where Alice Lehtinen explained solo entrepreneurs could only compete against large agencies by trying to make clients aware of the importance of quality. Tom Lang agreed smaller enterprises could not compete against large language polishing companies, whose business model relied on large volumes of work done quickly at low cost, unless they identified clients who appreciated the value of quality and were willing to pay for it.

The situation according to Andrew Davis was even worse in many states in Germany because they specified the lowest bid had to be accepted. He thought institutions faced with this problem should ensure poor quality did not result by demanding the backgrounds of the editors/translators were taken into account and specifying the acceptable error rates. This could not work in Sylwia's opinion as it would be impossible to mention all the backgrounds to meet the needs of all researchers and huge companies would still be likely to win. Besides it seems to me assessing error rates would be a nigh impossible task for the institutions.

Foppe said his journal had received articles provided with a certificate that they had been language edited but had rejected some because the language was below par. Often they had been badly structured and were a challenge to read. Similarly, Eric Lichtfouse considered the writing was not the main issue. Authors wrote messy papers even in their own native tongue, rather the problem was their inability to identify the main new or different message among their results before starting to write.

Eva in the Czech Republic reported her journal had a language specialist who checked every manuscript. She protested careless attitudes were penetrating science because too many people were rushing and engaged superficial thinking. She thought universities were to blame and suspected many manuscripts were submitted without consultation with the heads of the departments, who were no longer commenting and reading all the manuscripts. On the other hand, Judith Baggot who works in Milan said the head of her department still had to tick a box on a form that he had seen the manuscript and another as to whether it needed editing, but this was not the case overall.

The point that universities were failing to teach young scientists how to select their message and write academic articles was made by both Foppe and Eva but Christine Graham thought there were many points at which poor writing could be picked up and improved from the university to publishing stage. All those involved had a responsibility. She doubted with the pressure to publish any

university department head would prevent anyone from submitting a manuscript based on its language quality.

Although Foppe accepted researchers faced a challenge to write good English, he felt it was the responsibility of scientists to make sure they knew how to express themselves in the principal language of science. Writing articles in English was a skill that can be learned. After the write-up an experienced editor with knowledge of the specific field could help to polish the text. The cheaper general author services were usually not the most suitable for delivering scientific quality.

He suggested universities should be measured by the service they provide to society based on the esteem in which they were held by their peers and the usefulness of their research findings. Being cited meant their work was read and it had been used. The more difficult a paper was to read the less it would be cited. It was therefore in a university's interest to produce well edited quality papers. He thought it weird and stupid of universities to select editing services based on price. Apart from the relevance of the study, the quality of the publication should be a university's main concern if it wanted to fulfil a leading role in society.

As pointed out by Aleksandra Golebiowska, this assumed researchers read the papers they cite. Ed Hull, emphasising Foppe and Eric's points on poor structure, found the take-home message was often hidden in a mass of words. His students admitted to becoming lost when reading papers due to the style of writing. But despite being unable to accurately assess the credibility of studies they cited them anyway.

Andrew Davis also considered the belief that the more difficult a paper was to read the less often it was cited was unwarranted. People cited papers they had not read and read papers they did not cite. Readership indices were substantially different from citation indices. Also, scientists deliberately cited papers that were difficult to read because they believed the more difficult they were to read the more profound and scientific must be the content. Certainly, this was the view in Germany where he worked. Students had told him that their papers would not be read if they were too easy to understand. Ed Hull found the same attitude in the Netherlands. Students commonly told him they were afraid if they did not make their papers sound important they would not be accepted for publication. He felt this attitude led to a deliberate attempt to mislead readers with disastrous consequences described by Richard Harris in his book *Rigor Mortis*. Ann Bless offered the advice that when faced with such student comments the lecturer ask the students if they wrote for their own egos or to communicate. She had found most of her students got the message if challenged in this way. While Alison Terry, a copy editor, had encountered clients who admitted they had not understood papers they had cited and concluded people who lacked confidence in their ability to think clearly often resorted to throwing clever-sounding words into their manuscripts.

Erick Garcia pointed out that with interdisciplinary science becoming the standard way of doing science complex ideas needed to be accurately communicated to non-specialists. Poorly written text was defeating the advance of global science. He lamented that scientists who had not had training in scientific writing tried to learn from what they read without realising they were copying the mistakes of others. Journal editors should set the standard of what is acceptable for publication. He feared in a couple of decades if the current trend of publishing papers with low quality texts continued they would only be accessible to super-specialists. The general scientific community needed to be educated about the importance of high-quality texts. It was suggested EASE could play a role here.

A number of participants emphasised the need for universities or others to provide manuscript writing courses for young scientists. Sylwia considered the EASE Guidelines for Authors and Translators of Scientific Articles, freely available in 28 languages (www.ease.org.uk/publications/author-guidelines) useful course material. She had promoted the guidelines at the expert forum «Democracy in a Digital Society – Trust, Evidence and Public Discourse in a Changing Media Environment» (<https://www.allea.org/democracy-in-a-digital-society/?fbclid=IwAR3q3hBzCBTPVh5mVGckLxH60V9DsEXRudqaW5oqACoVePllAkPryPt7WQ>), and impressed the important role of science editors, the need for setting standards of science editing/translation and for courses on scientific writing for PhD students upon the Re-Imagine Europa group that hoped to create a programme for “renovation” of the EU in the next 5 years. She was intending to follow-up by sending the group suggestions from EASE.

Malforzata Wiesner had early asked the forum for reliable sources of freelance copyediting rates. EASE does not provide any guidelines on charges but Tom Lang highlighted a URL with a 2018 salary survey of medical writers in Europe. Freelance rates are on page 15: www.medcommsnetworking.com/presentations/clifton_040718.pdf

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