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Essay

A call for greater editorial responsibilities

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Introduction

The responsibility for what lies within a journal's contents lies solely with the editors, including the editor-in-chief and the publisher. Except in cases of misconduct where authors have abused the publishing process, the final published product implies a direct approval of the journal editors, usually resulting in benefits (financial, profiles, etc.) for the publisher. As fame, profit and other benefits (such as impact factors or other metrics) are equally derived from this process, editors and publishers must be held accountable for what is published, as this process also forms part of the fabric of corporate responsibility. Within the publishing framework, authors, peers, editors, the editor-in-chief, and the publisher, all have a set of clearly defined responsibilities [1]. Within the sub-category of authors, the corresponding author also has a particular set of unique responsibilities [2]. In addition to this, as exemplified by the fourth clause of the ICMJE (International Committee of Medical Journal Editors) guidelines for authorship [3], multiple authors are to be held equally accountable within a public framework, by designating them as corresponding authors, with one being assigned the responsibility for submitting the paper and dealing with related issues. This paper focuses on the editor base, and specifies why greater accountability is required.

Reasons for Greater Editorial Accountability

Many, if not most, leading science, technology and medicine (STM) publishers, are members of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) [4,5], with almost 10,000 paying member journals. As COPE members, the journals themselves and the editors who lead these journals, are expected to abide by a code of conduct (CoC) [6] that specifies rules and regulations demarcating editorial activities and responsibilities. One cause for the apparent increase in the number of retractions and dissatisfaction amongst the general scientific public, as exemplified by blogs and web sites like www.scholarlyoa.com, www.retractionwatch.com and www.pubpeer.com, is that the peer review process is imperfect [7]. One of the causes for this is that amongst many STM publishers, even as of 2015, there is a lack of standardization of several parameters such as definitions regarding authorship [8]. The issue of authorship is however, not the focus of this essay.

In general, top ranking journals tend to take the task of peer review seriously. Even so, the process has limitations, including the limited number of sets of eyes scrutinizing a paper. With

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an increase in the number of reviewers or editors, there is an increase in the number of errors detected. The number of published errors will decrease if authors are able to rectify these problems. Of course, this is an ideal scenario, not seen in most journals. In the best case scenario, peer review is a double-blind, and at the most 4 or 5 peers are vetted. In many cases, however, these peers are suggested by the authors, and thus the process lends itself to potential bias. Even if no conflicts of interest exist with the suggested peers, the fact that an author is requested by an editor or a publisher to select experts for an objective appraisal or critique of the work, is itself highly problematic and biased. Within a narrow field of science, one may argue that it is difficult to identify new peers who are in no way connected with other scientists. Thus the way in which peers are vetted and traditionally considered, is faulty, simply because at some point, conflicts of interest, bias, or a lack of neutral perspectives will be encountered. Within such an imperfect system, it is more than evident that errors will creep into published papers, despite apparently efficient editorial filtering processes. The decrease in the number of peers or editorial checks, results in an increasing risk of errors entering literature.

Conclusion

We are, as I see it, at a crossroads in the publishing network, where editors and publishers are failing to assume all of the responsibilities binding them in their CoCs, that they themselves have approved and agreed to conform to, or face public ridicule by the scientific community. Is it possible that not all editors are fully aware of the clauses and conditions that bind them in the peer review and publishing process? Take, for example, the COPE CoC. How does it hold peers accountable, even though ultimately it is editors who approve peer comments and suggestions for processing by authors? Either way, the literature continues to remain potentially highly corrupted, with the term "corrupted" implying the presence of errors or more serious issues such as plagiarism, falsified or duplicated data, and other products of acts of misconduct. Wager [9] recently emphasized that retractions exist to correct literature, and are especially useful for dealing with the latter category of cases of misconduct. Yet, retractions only serve to correct the largest, most evident ills of the literature [10]. Wager [9] also points out that there appears to be resistance by editors and publishers in correcting smaller errors that would require errata (errors by the authors) or corrigenda (errors by the publisher). Despite seeing a wave of errors being indicated daily at PubPeer, for example, why does the editorial base of STM publishers remain so reticent towards correcting this literature?

One way suggested in overcoming some of the weaknesses associated with the peer review process is open peer review. This also has inherent weaknesses, such as the number of digital object identifiers that exist per manuscript, or how to reference them. So, the system is currently in a state of self-appraisal, and evolution. Yet, despite this apparent positive trend in conversation related to the publishing process, few widely adopted solutions have been implemented. The most important concern, is the lack of the adaptation of post-publication peer review to remedy errors in published literature [11]. One has then to question the veracity of the COPE CoC, or rather its implementation by COPE member journals and their editors, including editor-in-chiefs. COPE member editors, and COPE member journals are in direct violation of their own rules if errors reported to such journals remain uncorrected. Giorgini et al. [12] clearly state that the function of having a CoC is to create a base of credibility, fairness, professional conduct, ethical decision-making and corporate behavior. However, if editors do not correct literature through post-publication peer review, either following disclosed identities, or through anonymous reports, then should they not be dismissed from their positions? Should not the publisher also suffer a direct penalty as a result of violating its own self-imposed rules?

Even when published literature is highly corrupted [13], there seems to be little appetite by editors and publishers to correct these errors. However, the issue is not about desire or appetite, it is about academic and corporate responsibilities of editors and publishers respectively. The responsibility becomes greater for COPE members, who pay an annual premium to sell their ethical image. Therefore, public shaming of editors and publishers who present a pseudo-ethical front, but who do not practice the issuing of errata, corrigenda or retractions in line with their written CoCs, must be shamed and called out in public with the objective of applying pressure to ensure that the erroneous literature is corrected.

Conflict of Interest

No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

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