Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

0638

Journal Editing: A Collapsing House of Cards?

Sandra Acker[1], Gina Wisker[2], Mika Rekola[3]

[1]University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario, Canada [2]University of Bath, Bath, United Kingdom
[3]University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

Research Domain: Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract: While the journal peer-review process has been subject to extensive commentary and critique, the work of journal editors has been relatively neglected. This paper reports data from an exploratory qualitative research project based on semi-structured interviews with 11 editors of higher education journals, located in seven different countries. The editors described the work they do, especially the process of desk rejection and their concerns about potential cultural biases as submissions come increasingly from all parts of the world. Although they mentioned the satisfactions they enjoyed, the interviews were dominated by concerns about the excessive time required and the lack of remuneration or recognition, not only from publishers but from the institutions where they work as full-time academics. Contemporary neoliberal trends have increased pressures for journal publication, which in turn increases the workload for editors, perhaps to the point where the system will, like a house of cards, begin to collapse.

Paper: Journal Editing: A Collapsing House of Cards?

Publishing is at the heart of the prestige economy that characterizes academe (Kwiek, 2021). Incentive schemes have been devised that reward academics for publishing in high-prestige journals (Opstrup, 2017) or withhold rewards from those unable to accomplish this feat, with consequences both for individuals and knowledge production (Gao & Zheng, 2020; Simula & Scott, 2020). Yet the journal peer review process is subject to much criticism, including lack of transparency, lengthy waits for evaluations and the negative tone of some reviewers (Pells, 2019). Aware that commentary on peer review has neglected the work of editors in chief (hereafter 'editors'), the authors of this paper designed an exploratory study with an overarching research question: *How do the editors of higher education journals describe their work?* Here we consider what editors do and their satisfactions and dissatisfactions.

Literature

Many articles on the topic of editors' work are essay-type critiques rather than empirical studies (e.g. Resnik and Elmore, 2016; Texeira da Silva et al., 2018). Best practices have also been a focus, especially in the popular press (Contributors, 2017). We also identified several survey-based studies (Committee on Publication Ethics [COPE], 2019; Mustaine & Tewksbury, 2016). The COPE report found that editors were concerned about plagiarism and how to address language and writing quality barriers while remaining inclusive.

Among qualitative studies, Hirschauer's (2015) ethnography pointed to complex decision-making when editorial boards meet to consider submissions (not the norm), while Wellington and Nixon's (2005) interviews with editors found participants describing their roles as a series of 'poles and continua: filter/gatekeeper, mediator/guardian, definer/defendant' (p. 646).

While the demographics of editors have not been extensively discussed, in certain fields, women have been shown to be under-represented in editorial roles (Lundine et al., 2018; Feeney et al., 2019). Representation of racialized scholars among editors has rarely been addressed (but see Chakravartty, 2018).

Method

After receiving ethical approval from our universities, we created a spreadsheet with details of 33 higher education journals, classified as generic (9), niche (14), disciplinary (5) or regional (5), and selected examples from each category. In 2019, we conducted 60 to 90-minute qualitative, semi-structured interviews with editors, six women and five men, located in seven countries. Interviews were recorded and transcribed in full.

Initial coding was done manually by one of us and the other two then added additional codes and comments. Agreement on themes for further analysis was reached through team discussion (Saldaña, 2016, p. 37).

Findings

A main responsibility for editors is 'desk rejecting', i.e. first stage rejections, which might be as high as 70%, according to one participant's estimate. Conventional reasons for rejection were unsuitability for the journal or poor quality. Editors worried that there might be cultural biases in the system, and the increasing range of countries represented in submissions exacerbated this anxiety. Other activities included publicizing, networking, finding reviewers, negotiating with publishers, rewriting statements of aims and financial oversight. Some editors did copy-editing.

Participants became editors for various reasons, such as identification with the journal and keeping up with the field. Satisfactions included seeing an issue come together, interacting with interesting people, 'giving back' to the community, and mentoring novice authors (Acker et al., 2021). What dominated the discussions, however, were workload pressures and lack of reward or appreciation, especially from their universities. Estimates of time required ranged from half a day to two days per week. This level of commitment was regarded as excessive and stressful. Most journals had increased the number of issues per year in order to cope with rising submission numbers. Finding peer reviewers was a chronic problem. All of the editors did their work on top of normal academic duties. Several mentioned co-editors who found sufficient time by retiring.

Some editors received modest financial or in-kind support from the publisher and/or their institution (e.g. to attend an annual conference), while others received none. One editor summarized: 'no release time, no credit, no money'. Editors tended not to get release time from their universities unless editing 'counted' in institutional ranking systems.

Conclusion

Despite the limitations of a small study and a single field, our research identifies serious problems. More submissions have not created better working conditions for editors, just more work. To the popular laments about lack of pay for reviewers and publishers' excessive profits we should add insufficiently rewarded editors. Editing now seems like a good job for a retiree. Might the system collapse under its contradictions, like a house of cards?

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