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Commentary

Substandard Journal Management: Wastage of Authors' Motivation

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Abstract: Authors who offer papers for publication to professional journals are under the impression that their work is publication-worthy. The editors as well as reviewers adjudge whether the manuscripts should be taken up for publication. This paper presents certain cases of unreliable journals' management processes with an aim to show how a journal reviewer or editor could squander authors' time and negatively impact the motivation of scholars to publish.

Keywords: journal; publication; author; reviewer; editor

1. Introduction

Editors of journals seek to make sure that the paper-reviewing process is comprehensive. Furthermore, editors make constant efforts to enhance the process of review. Information pertaining to the process of review and viewpoints of reviewers may be valuable for all writers in preparing papers, in turn aiding them to be more successful in having their work published in their preferred journals. Penning a manuscript which will be well regarded by the journal's editors, as well as by the reviewers, is somewhat of an art, as decisions are not merely based on the technical matter [1].

McCuen et al. [1] explain that the process of review can be assessed in terms of the following stakeholders, who have their own rights and duties: author, editor, and reviewer. When each of these stakeholders competently fulfill their duties, the process of review functions well and the journal is able to come up with quality papers. After an author submits his/her paper to a journal for reviewing, and the manuscript is processed by the editorial team, the journal's editor-in-chief steps in to make sure that the paper is scientifically and technically correct. In many world-class journals, when the editor-in-chief is satisfied, he/she assigns the paper to an associate editor. Such various tiers of editorial review might seem outmoded; however, they help in allocating the work load and, more importantly, they ensure a more thorough evaluation of manuscripts. The associate editor's responsibility is to identify two to three reviewers who are conversant with the subject matter of the manuscript. Reviewers may be chosen from available databases using keywords, or the associate editor may choose experts based on their relevant reputation. Typically, individuals who are invited to take up the task of reviewing are expected to respond to the request on time and convey their decision. After the reviewers submit their evaluations electronically into the editorial management system, the associate editor assesses the reviews to make sure that the comments are judicious and impartial. The associate editor might offer extra comments, which are intended to aid the authors in making the paper better. The file then goes back to the editor-in-chief who makes a decision and provides more comments. This multi-tier process seeks to make sure that submissions are evaluated fairly, and that the comments on improvement were taken into account, to produce an article with excellent technical quality. During the review process, if the submitted manuscript does not match the quality standard, the reviewer could suggest changes that will make the paper suitable for publication. If these changes are substantial, then it is advisable

to reject the paper and recommend it for resubmission, following extensive edits. Recommended changes are changes which, according to the reviewers (and editors), would enhance the quality of the paper [1].

Authors should submit their edited work back to the journal after making improvements based on the recommendations. The author(s), editor, as well as reviewer should make sure that the revised article corresponds to the comments offered in the review report. When all stakeholders perform well their duties, the published articles will be of high quality, thus improving also the quality of the journal [1].

2. Case One: Review

Wager et al. [2] say that finding peer reviewers could be a key part of an editor's role. This responsibility becomes especially challenging in the case of journals that cover a wide range of subject areas, the majority of which may be beyond the editor's own domain of proficiency. The peer-review procedure (decision pertaining to acceptance) may be unfair, if the selected reviewers are inapt (for instance, if they are not much aware of the subject or are prejudiced). The selection of the reviewer might also impact the standard of reviews and how views are expressed (for instance, the tone of the review or whether it is polite enough) [2].

Manuscript review is an expertise, which can be practiced and enhanced. According to Benos et al. [3], an able reviewer is one who espouses fair-mindedness, meticulousness, and truthfulness. Even though most referees do not have official training in the 'art of reviewing', they still contribute time and effort to ensure that quality research reaches its intended audience [4].

It is elucidated by McCuen et al. [1] that, if the preliminary review was all-inclusive, there-review should be completed quickly. The journal's editor and reviewers would then only have to make sure that responses have been provided for all comments, and that the improvements suggested by the reviewers have been satisfactorily dealt with. Usually, each of the obligatory changes should bring out a change in the paper. Suggested changes might also trigger some alterations. If the author decides not to accept the suggested changes, reasons and justifications should be submitted to the journal [1,5].

Here, the author is presenting a case of an unprofessional reviewer who had a negative effect on the motivation of author(s) to make the work better.

A researcher had presented a manuscript for likely publication in a covered by the journal area of research. The journal was indexed in renowned databases, including Scopus. The authors submitted the manuscript in August 2016 and the review–correction process lasted for four rounds, with a few weeks of time between each round. For the preliminary round, the author received comments from two reviewers: Reviewers 1 and 2. Authors made changes, accordingly, and submitted the revised version. Even though Reviewer 2 was content with the corrections, Reviewer 1 demanded more corrections. The report of the second round indicates that the paper quality got worse compared to the first round. However, according to the authors, this was not the case. Yet, the authors adhered to the comments of the second round, and submitted the paper again. For the next round, a similar scenario happened, and the report indicated that, with respect to certain review criteria, the paper was even worse now. According to the authors, they did not make a single change to those sections that were now assessed as more substandard than they were before. Revisions for the third round were submitted, and the same scenario occurred again. When comparing the results from the reviews, it is clear that the decisions of the reviewers were erratic. After four rounds and around half a year of reviews, the authors lost their will to carry out any further changes to the paper and quit the review process without further response.

3. Case Two: Editorial Decision

After a manuscript is submitted to a journal, it undergoes a preliminary screening that encompasses an initial review by the editor or the editorial board of the journal. At this juncture, the

editor has to select any one of the following two actions—either to proceed to review or send the manuscript back to the corresponding author [5,6].

If the editor notices that the paper fails to match the basic criteria or expectations of the journal, he/she might send the paper back, based on a preliminary screening, without sending it for peer review. In this case, the author is usually made aware of the reason for sending back the manuscript without review. Thus, if the paper's scope is not consistent with the journal, the author can make a submission to some other journal. However, the editor might be of the view that the paper is not appropriate for this specific journal, and may recommend that it could be sent to some other journal under the same organization. In some cases, the editor might suggest submission to a journal which is published elsewhere. In such scenarios, it is totally up to the author to decide what to do.

If the editor decides that the paper is compatible with the scope and conforms to the requirements of the journal, he/she will forward it for peer review. Manuscripts sent for peer review receive comments and suggestions from the peer reviewers. Any alteration in this sequence is against the rights of the authors.

Here, we present a case showing how an editor might waste the author's time if he/she does not adhere to the aforementioned steps. A manuscript was sent to a journal that was indexed in several renowned databases such as Scopus. When the author did not receive any feedback for a few months, he contacted the journal, asking for updates on his submission. He got a reply from the editor that the selected reviewers had not responded to the journal. The email clearly indicated that the journal had not taken any further steps to hire another reviewer. The author asked the journal to carry on with the manuscript review. Since there was no response from the journal, the author sent a reminder a few days later. The journal's response was quite brief: will assign ASAP. The journal later sent a review result, along with comments for improvement. Following receipt of the revised manuscript, the journal accepted it for publication. The paper was slated to be published after around eight months from that point. Two months prior to this publication time, the author received an email with reference to his paper, stating that it was inapt for publication due to the scope of the work.

The author replied to the email, copying the journal's managing editor, stating that the paper was at first accepted by the editor and sent for review; following improvements, it was slated for publication. The author assumed that the sender of the email had been unaware of the alteration in the title of the manuscript, as was recommended by one of the reviewers, and explained the problem. However, no reply was given.

The author noticed that the previous email was sent by the journal's editor-in-chief who (according to the managing editor) was finalizing the paper for publication. The author then requested a reassessment of the decision, but received no response.

4. Case Three: Communications

"I am pleased to inform you that your manuscript has been accepted for publication. Please note that the Official Acceptance Letter will be sent to you after you have effected payments for your article. Kindly make payment as soon as possible to enable us to include your manuscript in this month's publication". This acceptance email is good news. This message was from a journal indexed by Scopus after a usual review and correction process. After receiving the acceptance email, the author paid the publication fees for open access publication. When he sent the payment receipt to the journal, the response was "Thanks for the email. We could not track your payment with the information provided by you".

A few days later, after checking with the bank, the author sent an email to the journal and asked about the status of the payment receipt, but did not receive any response. Many more emails, asking for the payment status, have remained unanswered, until a few months later the author received a galley proof for his article.

In a separate case with a different journal, the author had similar communication problem with another journal. After making corrections on a galley proof, the author found out that the paper had been published without the corrections.

5. Conclusions

Authors should not expect too much of the review process, when they realize that the reviewers do it for free and many of the editors also work without payment. The peer review system forms the basis of scientific research, but it is not always a fair system [5,7]; for example, in some cases, a manuscript could be rejected for reasons such as that another article was published in the same field of study or by the same author, in the same journal volume. Some of the problems stem from the fact that the peer review system is a complex of social interactions, in which scholars interact in different roles—as authors or journal editorial and review board members—in a decentralized, barely transparent, and somewhat unregulated system [8]. There are different practices of work among journal stakeholders; but it is important to emphasize that the journals' management process is an essential factor for motivating the authors in submitting their papers. Even so, below are some suggestions for improvement of the journals' management system:

Multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary trends in research should encourage journals to have sufficient number of associate editors with a broad background that will allow them to understand the submitted papers. To increase the quality of the review process, the editors should dismiss associate editors who do not provide detailed comments beyond the comments of the reviewers, especially when the reviews are not well done.

Judgment of the editors, as well as of the reviewers, has a bearing on whether a manuscript should be accepted for publication. This decision should be based on novelty and technical quality of the submissions. Unfortunately, some of them sometimes feel that they only need to correct language and formatting issues. Moreover, not always all the reviewer's comments could improve the quality of the manuscript. Publishers should have systems to rate the reviewers, so that future papers are not sent to reviewers who have a history of providing inadequate reviews. Furthermore, a bigger group of experts should be involved to ensure the fairness and quality of the peer review process. Based on McCuen et al. [1], the comments for the author should be quite explicit, because authors find it difficult to make changes when the suggestions are ambiguous. Reviewers and editors should clearly express their comments to make sure that they are effectively communicating their concerns to the author(s). The authors, on the other hand, should clearly present their findings so that the editors and the reviewers could fully understand the rationale behind the results.

Every journal has to make sure that the communications between stakeholders are effectively carried out. Unfortunately, most of the delays in publication are due to poor communication and the fact that some journals do not have a strict deadline for reviews to be submitted. Slow review and inappropriate communication are the concern of many authors. Last but not least, journals need to be made aware that the primary goal of their industry is to motivate the scientific community to communicate their expertise and research findings.

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