
Professionalism In Scientific Reviews

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EDITORIALS

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This issue of the Bulletin has posed an ethical question: is it appropriate for our associate editors to publish in the Bulletin? Our affirmative response may be apparent to anyone scanning the listings of associate editors and authors of papers. The attendant problems and reasons for our decision are not as simple.

At least it did not seem simple for participants at the May 1995 Council of Biology Editors meeting who addressed this and related questions in Kansas City. Many journal staffers did not condone associate editors publishing in the journal they served. However, they mostly represented medical journals, which are comparatively numerous within given disciplines and therefore afford no dearth of alternative publication options for their associate editors. Conversely, the journals that did extend publication privileges to their associate editors tended to be from biological fields with far fewer alternative publication options for their associate editors.

The American Fisheries Society, for example, does not feel it is appropriate to penalize their associate editors by prohibiting them from publishing in the Society's journals simply because they have agreed to provide a service to the Society. The editor of *Colonial Waterbirds* had a similar perspective, again because of the very narrow niche of that journal and few optional publication sources. Instead of prohibiting intrajournal publishing, these journals treat associate editors' manuscripts as any other, seeking the same evenhanded review and publication consideration.

Affording associate editors this freedom, however, erects a question of propriety: does the practice invite bias into the scientific review process? For example, in the interest of maintaining good working relationships with associate editors, editors could be reluctant to reject an associate editor's manuscript, or an author who has experienced unfavorable scientific review by the journal might, as a referee, be unduly critical of an associate editor's manuscript. Other referees may not want to be too critical of an associate editor's manuscript if they plan to submit a manuscript that could end up in that associate editor's in-basket, although this is not very likely under an anonymous peer review system. While these circumstances are undoubtedly unusual, few would disagree that even infrequent problems with review bias should be avoided, if possible.

Double-blinding — that is, the masking of authors' names from referees, and vice versa — may help eliminate biased reviews of both associate editors' manuscripts, as well as those of other authors (non-associate editors). However, this would not help the editor because masking the author's identity from the editor is not realistically feasible. In addition, a referee's familiarity with research in their field may reveal the colleague's identity and render double-blinding moot. Or it could lead to incorrect speculation of the authors' identities and thereby interject the possibility of mistaken identity and bias. Such anonymity failures are particularly likely where expertise in an aspect of research is limited to a handful of specialists.

Given the limitations of double-blinding, excluding associate editors from publishing in the journals they serve may seem more attractive. However, referee and editorial predisposition can intrude upon the scientific review process, regardless of whether the author is an associate editor or not. Therefore, preventing associate editors from publishing in the journal would thwart but a small portion of the potential instances of review bias. Consequently, the Bulletin chooses to rely on a less tangible, but more ubiquitous, solution: reviewer and editor integrity — their professionalism.

In this age that glorifies the professional, it seems ironic that scientific misconduct continues to be manifested across all disciplines. For example, Sandy Shumway, editor of the *Journal of Shellfish Research*, recently wrote (summer 1995, Quarterly Newsletter of the National Shellfisheries Association) about the surprising occurrence (8 in the past 5 months) of referee recommendations that were totally opposed on the subject of whether to publish or reject a given manuscript. Such dichotomy, she acknowledged, can be based on legitimate scientific disagreement, but she also noted that much is instead "borne of political origin and even jealousy." Acknowledging need for improvements, we must expect and judiciously pursue unbiased reviews and editorial purview. If referees and editors cannot rise above any attendant personality issues and competitive interests and conduct a review that is objective and impartial, then we must ask them to excuse themselves from reviewing that manuscript.

The Bulletin's referees and associate editors are providing an invaluable service with little recognition or appreciation, but the authors and science are correct

in expecting and demanding professionalism within the scientific review process. We are confident that the Bulletin's referees and editors will meet this protocol, and this assumption forms the basis of our decision to allow associate editors to publish in the Bulletin.

To strengthen that assumption, the Bulletin is including a brief statement in its instructions to referees that will remind them of their ethical obligations when conducting reviews and request they excuse themselves if they believe they may not be able to be objective. In addition, the merits of double-blinding will be considered by the Editorial Board this November; in spite of its shortcomings, it might provide some additional assurance against the occasional unfair review.

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