

The Slippery Slope of Editing : Balanced Perspectives for Initiating a New Biomedical Journal

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Since the evolutionary advent of scientific thinking, medical journals have been well-known and influential media for professional and scientific discourse within academia. Such journals have been an integral part of medical literature, comprising content relating to historical and contemporary views about diagnosis, prognosis, and medical conditions management. Starting from the *Edwin Smith Papyrus* (first known medical treatise) of Egypt to *Yellow Emperor*, China, *Iliad and Odyssey*, Greece to our own *Charaka and Sushruta Samhitas*: medical discourse has been presented in various forms which have led to the contemporary evolution of medical journals.[1] Contrary to the plethora of unauthenticated medical information and health-related news available in the modern world, published content in scientific journals has to pass through a rigorous and preferably blinded peer review process. This essentially keeps in check the content-validity and scientific relevance of published material through reviews by equally or more qualified experts in the same fields as the author, promoting revisions and suggestions to improve the manuscripts' quality. Initiating a new medical journal (especially in the growing field of mental health) is always a challenge laden with the thin line of balance between ensuring scientific rigor and exciting content and being 'lost' in an endless pool of rapidly-emerging biomedical publications.

ROLE OF AN EDITOR : THE SLIPPERY SLOPE

"If you do not want to make friends, become an editor."

Dr. H. Whitefield, Editor-in-Chief, British Journal of Urology, 1985[2]

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Even though a completed journal issue with a great lineage of good quality papers appear glamorous and praiseworthy, the 'behind the scenes' efforts of an editor remain silent but potentially most challenging. Irrespective of the hierarchical organizations of editorial responsibilities (Editor-in-chief, associate editors, section editors, review editors, etc.), editing peer-reviewed medical journals is stressful and frustrating, yet in the end, a rewarding task, especially when the journal originates in a developing country. Editors are responsible and accountable for determining and finalizing content for peer-reviewed journals. As defined by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE), experts need to review such journals outside the purview of the journal's editorial board.[3] In that sense, editors' responsibilities extend to all the authors, reviewers, readers, study participants, the broader academia, and finally to medical science itself. An optimal balance between all these stakeholders is the primary challenge and essential onus of the editor. The editorial process serves as an *"intermediary function to facilitate the transmission of valid, useful knowledge while screening out poor quality, redundant, and irrelevant material"*[4] Editors keep facing a myriad of problems: balancing personal-professional boundaries, catering to the endless author correspondence, ensuring a timely yet honest peer-review, quality check for each of the publications, timeliness of the entire process, and most important, decisions to reject a paper that is often personally a bitter yet necessary experience.[5] Often, the presence of an 'unblinded review system,' lack of disclosures related to conflict of interest, redundant publications, fraud and plagiarism, ghost authorship, advertising, sensitive language use and stigma, absence of a declaration of patient consent and 'rigging the Impact Factor (IF)' are some of the critical issues especially in a new journal.[6] Pragmatically, authors' failure to comply with instructions, inferior quality manuscripts, duplicate submissions, 'slicing,' ethical challenges of publication, non-availability, and varying quality of

reviewers. Lack of trained support staff, unsatisfactory copy-editing are some of the other pertinent adversities faced by scientific journals emerging from developing countries. Over time, these are compounded by the constant need to improve the journal's standards, ensure outreach and publicity, and gain good indexing in popular databases, which are essential for the sustenance of any scientific journal in academia. Mostly, with the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, a never-ending curve of research parallels the growth curve of the viral caseload. During such a global healthcare crisis which has an immense psychosocial and emotional impact, a psychiatric journal needs to disseminate real-time and accurate information which can be critical for constructive discourse building across the mental health community, facilitating understanding and management of psychiatric problems, and helping policy makers during the ongoing situation of substantial uncertainty.[7] This all the more pressurizes the editor to maintain the balance between comprehensive yet timely manuscript processing and elimination of invalid and unscientific information.

SPECIFIC VITAL RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE JOURNAL EDITOR

Towards the readers

- Content is valid and from reputed sources
- Factually accurate, balanced, and unbiased
- Opinions and hypothesis differ from original research
- Potential conflict of interest disclosed
- Pejorative and sensitive language avoided
- Readable with a standardised style
- Timely and consistent publication

Towards the authors

- Clear and standardised instructions and submission guidelines
- Dignity
- Timely, constructive and confidential review
- Outreach and feedback

Towards the reviewers

- Open to peer guidance, reviewer recognition
- Regular discussions and obtaining suggestions
- Discussion forum
- Reviewer meets

Towards the Organisation/funding body of the journal

- Transparency in policies and advertisements
- Avoiding legal complications
- Formalize contract and employment (if applicable)
- Regular meetings and interactive forums

EDITING A NEW JOURNAL: A CAREFUL PATH TO TREAD

Besides the hardships mentioned above, financial and resource constraints can pose a serious challenge to the editorial job in developing countries. This is of all the more concern, if the owner and editor of the journal is the same person. In today's world where 'every newly launched product' is subject to evaluation and competitive 'rat race', publicity of naïve journals is also subject to outreach, popularity, and maintenance which needs to be at par with established journals at the same field. The former editor of British Medical Journal (BMJ), Richard Smith, highlighted that clinicians, researchers, editors, and journalists should also seek to accept the existing shortcoming of medical journals and actively act to reform them. Most importantly, like 'treatment guidelines', there are no available frameworks to guide the editors for an 'ideal editing process'. [8] As Dr Smith further mentions drawing an analogy to parenting, the process of editing is a learned skill and evolves over a period of time with multiple 'trial-runs' as there is no one 'absolute right path' to succeed. He also draws attention that less than 5% of published literature in journals with good IF are from the low and middle-income countries.[8] While the enthusiasm and efforts are praiseworthy for entrepreneurship related to new journals, a few challenges and pitfalls need to be kept in mind.

SPECIFIC CHALLENGES OF THE EDITOR WHILE STARTING A NEW SCIENTIFIC JOURNAL

- Editorial staff training and funding
- Ensuring timely peer-review and adequate reviewers
- Constructive feedback to the authors/reviewers
- Consistency and regularity of the issues
- Matching the existing editing standard in the field
- Quality control and scientifically relevant information
- Outreach to the scientific community and academia

- Targeting young researchers
- Ethical considerations for publications and plagiarism
- Not emerging as just “another journal” in the field
- Approximate indexing and citation
- Meaningful contribution to the field of medical science

While performing the editorial work related to a journal launched newly in the field, the team needs to balance enthusiasm with pragmatism and reality. Many regional journals remain constricted to particular zones and areas with limited scientific appeal to the researchers, leading to unsuccessful solicitation attempts for manuscripts and eventual cessation of the journal issues. On the other hand, an overly permissive approach will lead to ‘trash publications’ that might bypass the peer-review process. Even though lucrative for young researchers, this might lower the IF, affect the citation index, and finally run the risk of that journal being considered ‘predatory’ and ultimately extinct.

Some of the common pitfalls while editing a new journal and possible consequences are listed under:

- Excessive gap between the issues that compromises readability
- Conflicts of financial interests if the editor owns the journal as well
- Unclear and ambiguous instructions for the authors (reduce the contribution and interest)
- ‘Too strict versus too permissive review process’: Lack of publishable articles versus unscientific publications
- Opinions, viewpoints, case reports >> Original research (a proportional balance needs to be maintained)
- Poor copy-editing (issues with grammar, spelling, and flow will compromise the quality and authenticity)
- Internal peer-review by members of the editorial board due to lack of adequate external peer-reviewers (affects the scientific rigor)
- Personal remarks that might be socio-politically or ideologically influenced if not adequately reviewed (can fuel controversies and ethical issues)
- ‘Dumped publications’: in an attempt for fast publications, most manuscripts that are selected have been rejected from other journals.
- For journals without a professional publication platform (like Elsevier, SAGE, Taylor & Francis Online, etc.): manual organization of editing work can lead to a significant delay
- Poor and delayed response to the authors and reviewers: leads to reduced credibility in the scientific forum.
- Low balance between acceptance and rejection rates: a constructive feedback is necessary, especially for young researchers encouraging them to submit their work
- Excessive social publicity: runs the risk of being considered ‘casual and unscientific.’
- Editor involved in multiple roles: can lead to role-overlap and conflicts of interest
- Compromising the publication ethics (certain steps like obtaining the ISBN no., the ICJME Conflict of Interest declaration from the authors, duly signed copyright forms, and adherence to the COPE guidelines help in better indexing)
- Multiple articles from within the editorial team or by the same set of authors (which are common in new and regional journals that can markedly hamper their scientific popularity)
- Risk of slicing, duplicate publications, and plagiarism
- Increased advertising (mostly by the pharmaceutical industry) for funding which can have ethical and legal implications affecting journal maintenance.
- The distinction between a ‘scientific journal’ versus a ‘public magazine’

THE WAYS AHEAD

These pitfalls are not absolute, and as mentioned before, the ‘nitty-gritties’ of the editorial work are best appreciated by the editor himself/herself being involved in the process. Despite these challenges, the picture is not that gloomy. Medical editors of biomedical journals across the world, especially from developing nations, have made significant progress. It is all the more commendable as many researchers take up this work without any formal training and the hands-on experience serves as the best for them. Many such editors have successfully run many Indian journals that have gained global attention, good indexing, and popularity among researchers. It is important to understand that the responsibilities of editing are often added to other professional commitments of the editors and, in most cases, remain as honorary and purely of an academic interest. The most significant incentives in that case are

readability, fame, contribution, and acceptance of the journal among the scientific community that best meets readers, authors, and reviewers' expectations. The professional satisfaction of editing is considered to be of immense satisfaction by many renowned editors.

India already has a few successfully running psychiatry journals, however that is not a hindrance to a new psychiatric journal helping to contribute more to the field. In the widely growing mental health arena, research has been rapidly emerging in biological, psychosocial, and neuropsychiatric domains that need to be published and conveyed to the global community. Any initiative in this regard is welcome. In a socio-culturally diverse nation that comprises nearly 18% of the world's population, there will never be a dearth of good-quality scientific content for publication if professionally encouraged and given a constructive forum to flourish. With technology aiding health research in a big way over the last few decades that has gained a renewed impetus during this pandemic, most journals have transited to online forums with options of 'online-first' publications rather than regular time-bound issues that helps in rapid dissemination of timely research as well as bears an economic benefit. Besides the traditional principles of editorial staff training, adherence to publication ethics, adequate and timely peer-review as well as active solicitation of articles across scientific forums, few other techniques might help the editor of a freshly-mint psychiatric journal. They include a website/online forum specifically dedicated for the journal; 'out-of-the-box' strategies like inclusion of video/audio abstracts, papers, author interviews; involvement of inter-sectorial research, inclusion of psychological and social sciences; first-person perspectives and opinion pieces that can be published in a blog associated with the journal; having a broad and adequate pool of peer-reviewers in each sub-section based on their expertise; pre-decided formats of publishing and ethical policies; transparent display of all the details for the authors, readers, and reviewers on the journal forum/website and finally regular meetings, feedback, and training of the editorial staff for better services. A couple of points need special mention: the involvement of students and early career researchers is extremely important and helps a journal gain immense popularity. A lot of them might be unable to find the right forum for their research, and constructive feedback from a new but scientifically rigorous journal help in their mutual improvement. A

separate section for these young researchers can enhance the journal's selling points. BMJ Student (a separate but independently operating section of the BMJ) can serve as an ideal example.[9] Further, active collaboration is necessary with well-known journals, editors, and publishers for periodic trainings and workshops in editorial work, peer-review process, and journal maintenance that greatly help in learning, growth, and sharing of important insights across the editorial community which can serve as vital 'steps' for a journal in its adolescence.

Ultimately, editing is a fun-filled learning process, and the final fruit is always worthy! However, the challenges are practically learnt than taught. A critical balance between professionalism, personal relationships, and academic commitments is vital to guide an editor through the process, and no 'one size fits all'. Eventually, it's the final discretion of the editor that makes the journal a reality, and that discretion needs to come out of a "*balanced and informed choice*" without any attempt to possibly please everyone involved. To conclude with the words of another former editor of the BMJ, Sir Hugh Clegg, "*A medical editor has to be the keeper of the conscience of a profession and if she/she tries to come up to this idea, he/she always will be getting into trouble*".[10]

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