
Editorial

A taxonomy of editors

European science editors – who are we? Stuart Handysides posed this question in his Editorial in November (*European Science Editing* 2008;34(4):93). In February 2008 (34(1):3), Marcin Kozak had asked a similar question: Who are you, Editors? There seems to be a degree of uncertainty about who we are. Fortunately, Handysides was able to clarify several quantitative aspects of the membership of EASE – geographic distribution, gender balance, and the number of journals represented.

Kozak was perplexed by the names of editors in various positions: “It is clear that there is a mess in terminology for editors in science journals.” Kozak’s editorial brought to mind a suggestion made by Andrew Herxheimer at an EASE Conference a very long time ago – we need a taxonomy of editors. Kozak, once again, has shown how necessary this is.

My starting point for such a taxonomy would be the functions of editors in the realm of science publishing. The function that all editors share is the safeguarding of quality. Such quality applies to content and presentation as well as to processes.

1. *Content control*: editors decide about the fate of submitted manuscripts: reject outright, publish without modification, or return to the author for improvement. A further distinction is possible on the basis of independence and responsibility:

a. Does the editor decide on his or her own and is this decision final? Such a person may be called a “decision editor”, or a “chief editor”, but in general they are simply called an “editor”. It does not really matter whether an appeal is possible to any decision made. Even then, someone will have the final say about publication.

b. If there is someone who can overrule this decision, this person may still be an editor, but the overruling power then definitely belongs to the “chief editor” (1a).

c. Editors may have a responsibility that pertains only to a certain part of a publication, such as sections or geographic regions. If they have decision power within their field, they might be called “editor for [region]” or “section editor” or simply “editor”.

d. For some publications, decisions are not taken by one person but by a collective that may be known as an “editorial board” or an “editorial committee” or something similar. An appropriate name for the members of such a collective might be “co-editor”. It may happen that one person is the chairman of this collective, which, in my view, would make him or her a “chairperson”, rather than a “chief editor”.

Individuals who give their view on a paper, but who have no decision power, should be considered “peer reviewers” or “referees” or “advisors”, but not “editors”. Editors often follow the advice of advisors – but so long as those advisors have no formal position to enforce their advice, they remain simply “advisors”.

2. *Presentation control*: editors take responsibility for implementation of house style, correct use of language, appropriate and effective layout, and so on. Usual names for such people are “technical editor”, “copy editor”, “desk editor”, and “sub-editor”. This range of designations might best be combined under one name, and my choice would be “technical editor”.

3. *Process control*: editors who control processes are seldom involved in or have any influence over the content of a publication. The remit of such “managing editors” is to ensure that editorial processes or projects run smoothly. A managing editor may also be the secretary of an editorial board who prepares and executes the decision of this board even though this secretary has no right to vote. For the latter position I would like to reserve the name of “executive editor”.

Then, of course, there is the all-in-one editor: the lone woman or man who combines all these functions in one person. It is these “lonesome editors” who can benefit most from the specialised diversity of editors present in EASE. EASE is the nourishing environment where an undifferentiated seed can grow into a complex organism with numerous functions and tasks; where editors can learn to perform all activities that are necessary for both simple journals and complex editorial organizations like those of, say, *Nature* or *Journal of Chromatography*.

Welcome to EASE’s editorial greenhouse.

Allow me to emphasise again: my primary focus is on functions, not on the names of those functions. Those readers who like to solve puzzles might try to fit the following designations into my tentative taxonomy: advisory editor, assistant editor, associate editor, consultant editor, deputy editor, senior editor – and there are still more, as we are all aware.

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