EDITORIAL

Editorial independence in biomedical publishing

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ABSTRACT

Unlike my other editorials published in AP J Psychol Med, the views expressed in this editorial are not completely my own; hence, most of the information is in quotes. I tried to summarize the published literature related to editorial independence. The sole aim is to make all the stakeholders aware of the concept of ‘editorial independence’. The societies have the duty to create an atmosphere where editors feel secure. With humility I would say, to my knowledge this is the only published article on ‘editorial independence’ from India, and possibly other neighbouring countries. Let me sincerely say, this is not a grandiose expression. I stand to be corrected.

Keywords: Medical journal; professional medical association; editorial independence; publication ethics; conflict of interest; bias

INTRODUCTION

The last few months of my editorship have been very hectic. I got ‘dragged’ into the centre of a controversy whether to publish or not to publish a particular manuscript. Journal editors sometimes need to take difficult decisions because of various reasons. Hence, it was imperative that as a journal editor, I should be aware of international publication guidelines. Though, initially I thought this controversy and discussion was ‘unnecessary’; thankfully, this made me more aware of my responsibilities as an editor and, thus, helped me raise the standards of my journal.

The journals are the vehicles for transmission of knowledge gained through biomedical research. They aim to provide the readers with information that is of quality and is evidence based. This can only be ensured when the journal’s editorial quality is unbiased which in turn reflects the journal’s independent nature. “Certainly, many factors operate in today’s medical publishing climate that allows for vulnerability in a medical journal’s editorial independence.” [1] These include the pharmaceutical companies, authors, or even the society that owns that journal. Few ‘ambitious authors’ want the editor to bypass the peer review process; they try to ‘push work through by appealing to outside professional collaborations’. [2] These can jeopardise the editor’s freedom which is commonly known as ‘editorial independence’.

In 1999, the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) published a methodologically sound manuscript that surveyed college students as to what they considered sex; 60% responded that ‘oral sex did not equate to sex’. [3] This was taken as a support by the defence during the Clinton-Lewinsky controversy. The American Medical Association (AMA) claimed this article ‘forced JAMA outside of medicine into the political scene’ and removed Lundeberg, the chief-editor of the JAMA from his post. “[4] It can certainly be said that the AMA’s political affiliations introduced a potential conflict of interest that could have influenced its reaction to the article.” [1] This is an oft-quoted example of compromise of editorial independence. There are many such examples.

Hoey, [5] made extremely critical remarks, “For journal owners and publishers, generally risk avoiders, such a wide compass may be perceived (wrongly, I believe) as of little interest to their dues-paying members and as potentially damaging to their political or economic priorities. Owners may wish to limit the scope of their journal, to restrict its editorial perspective to matters of bedside medicine and the narrower interests (as perceived by the usually non-physician publishers) of their physician readership...The notion that politically sensitive topics can be expunged from a medical journal is folly. It is also irresponsible. Physicians and their patients must have faith that professional journals facilitate a discourse unencumbered by the economic and political interests of their owners....The ability of an editor to edit depends to an important degree on the editor’s own outlook and self-assurance (often mistakenly interpreted as arrogance).”

“How each editor...and each...owner will have different views of editorial independence.... Owners see their legal rights.... whereas editors gaze on authors, peer reviewers, editorial boards... and above all, interested readers....For an editor, the journal is much more than legal ownership.” [5] The manuscripts submitted to a journal should undergo rigorous peer review by experts in the field. Both, the editor and the editorial board are supposed to ensure that this is in place. [1] Though the publication of a scientific journal involves many individuals, editor is ultimately responsible for its quality.
Along with making him responsible it is also essential that he should be given freedom so as to fulfil this responsibility adequately. Many factors may jeopardize his editorial decisions. “The challenge however, arises when another layer of complexity is added with an additional player- the professional medical association.”[1] If this happens, who else will ensure scientific integrity? Hence, editorial independence is very important for good publication practice. [6]

DISCUSSION

Are the editors really independent

Davis and Mullner surveyed the editors of 33 journals affiliated with not-for-profit associations. 70% editors agreed to ‘complete’ editorial freedom, while 30 % rated it as ‘high’. Few editors reported being at least under some pressure. The authors opined that the editors need to have ‘written guarantees of editorial freedom and governance structures that support those guarantees’. [7] Etemadi et al. [6] argue that these results cannot be generalized, and ‘may be biased towards a favourable picture of the situation governing editor-owner interactions’; also, editors may not be ‘aware of the full extent of freedom they must enjoy’.

The World Association of Medical Editors (WAME) considers ‘editorial independence’ an important component of the publication of a medical journal as evident in the following policy document; [8]

“The relationship between journal editors-in-chief and owners (formerly titled editorial independence)

Editors-in-Chief and the owners of their journals both want the journals to succeed but they have different roles. The editors-in-chief’s primary responsibilities are to inform and educate readers, with attention to the accuracy and importance of journal articles, and to protect and strengthen the integrity and quality of the journal and its processes. Owners (whether professional associations,...) support the core values and policies of their organization and are ultimately responsible for all aspects of publishing the journal,...The relationship between owners and editors-in-chief should be based on mutual respect and trust, and recognition of each other’s authority and responsibilities.....

The following are guidelines for protecting the responsibility and authority of both editors-in-chief and owners:

1. The conditions of the editors-in-chief’s employment, including authority, responsibilities, term of appointment, reporting relationships, and mechanisms for resolving conflict, should be explicitly stated in writing and approved by both editor and owner before the editor is appointed. Those conditions bearing on editorial freedom should be shared with readers by publication in the journal or on its website.

2. Editors-in-chief should have full authority over the editorial content of the journal, generally referred to as “editorial independence.” Editorial content includes original research, opinion articles and news reports,...and how and when information is published.

Owners should not interfere in the evaluation, selection or editing of individual articles, either directly or by creating an environment in which editorial decisions are strongly influenced.

3. Editorial decisions should be based mainly on the validity of the work and its importance to readers, not the policies or commercial success of the owner. Editors should be free to publish critical but responsible views about all aspects of medicine without fear of retribution, even if these views might conflict with the policies or commercial goals of the owner. To maintain this position, editors should seek input from a broad array of advisors such as reviewers, editorial staff, an editorial board, and readers.

4. Editors-in-chief should establish procedures that guard against the influence of commercial, organizational, and personal self-interest on editorial decisions and should make these procedures clear and transparent to all interested parties.......

5. Owners have the right to hire and fire editors-in-chief but they should dismiss them only for substantial reasons such as a pattern of bad editorial decisions, disagreement with the long-term editorial direction of the journal, or personal behaviour (such as criminal acts) that are incompatible with a position of trust. It may also be appropriate to end the editor’s service if, for whatever reason, owners and editors find they are unable to work together in a spirit of mutual trust and collaboration. Termination of an editor’s appointment should be a deliberate process, involving open discussion at the highest level of the organization, and should not be precipitous, except for egregious wrongdoing.

6. The limits of editorial freedom are difficult to define in the general case. Editors should be receptive to articles representing all legitimate points of view and should be free to publish any responsible positions. However, owners cannot be expected to retain editors who take strong, consistent, one-sided positions against the core values and policies of their parentorganization.

7. Editors-in-chief should report to the highest governing body of the owning organization, not its administrative officers. Major decisions regarding the editor’s employment should be made by this body with open discussion and time to hear from all interested parties. Some organizations have found it useful to establish an independent oversight committee to advise them on major decisions regarding their editor and journal. Both owners and editors should have a meaningful role in appointment of members, since both are stake-holders in the committee’s effectiveness.....
8. Editors should resist any actions that might compromise these principles in their journals, even if it places their own position at risk. If major transgressions do occur, all editors should participate in drawing them to the attention of the international medical, academic, and lay communities.”

This concept of editorial independence by WAME was adopted by International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE): [9]

“Editors-in-chief have full authority over the entire editorial content of their journal and the timing of publication of that content... and editors should be free to express critical but responsible views about all aspects of medicine without fear of retribution, .... owners should ensure that appropriate insurance is obtained in the event of legal action against the editors, and should ensure that legal advice is available when necessary.... Editors.... should ensure that staff working for the journal adhere to best journalistic practices including contemporaneous note-taking and seeking a response from all parties when possible before publication. Such practices in support of truth and public interest may be particularly relevant in defence against legal allegations of libel.... Editors and editors’ organizations are obliged to support the concept of editorial freedom and to draw major transgressions of such freedom to the attention of the international medical, academic, and lay communities.”

Once editorial independence is in place, the editor can focus on a journal that “educates his readers and reports new knowledge.” [10] Smith asserts, “Editorial independence is a space in editors’ heads, a complex function of their personality, courage, power, and the pressures they feel from owners, business people, and others.” [11]

How to ensure editorial independence

Talking about editorial independence, Marušiæ et al, [12] beautifully put it, “For more than ten years we functioned without knowing who actually owned the Journal, who could hire or fire us as editors, and to whom we had the reporting responsibility.... each party should have responsibilities and privileges, and that none, either by power or by weakness, should endanger the journal’s existence and editorial freedom.”

All stakeholders should be careful and feel responsible to ensure editorial independence. These include the editorial team, the authors, the members of association and the readers. [3] Weerasinghe, [13] suggests the following to ensure editorial independence:

- Editorial terms should be determined beforehand
- Periodic evaluation by the readers
- Creation of ‘oversight committee’ with different journal editors to handle editorial disputes.
- Unique publication model: an open-access journal which is self-sufficient, with associated financial issues.

- Publication of articles should be at the discretion of the editors, and not ‘external forces’.

At the same time editors should also ensure that they are not influenced in their decision making. The sole criterion for publication should be merit. They should not be biased in their choice of reviewers or editorial decisions. [6] They should select talented editorial staff and the editorial board who can help them reach this goal. [5] The fact that the editor and editorial board members work free of cost also ensures editorial independence. [12]

Relating to the editor’s responsibility regarding publication of a manuscript in AP J Psychol Med, I sought EASE’s guidance. This case was presented to EASE anonymously. Dr Joan Marsh, the EASE President advised the following, [13] by summarizing the information available in the EASE Science Editors’ Handbook: [14]

“The editor should clarify with the society who has editorial responsibility and that should be written down for future reference. The journal should have a clear policy on what is sent for peer review, how many positive or negative reviews are required for a decision, and the general criteria for rejection or acceptance following peer review, including who makes the final decision. The journal should have a conflict of interest policy, where any conflict or the absence of any conflict is stated for each article. If you do proceed with publication, you could invite members of the society who oppose the paper to submit correspondence and publish that in the same issue as the paper. In the medium term, you should definitely establish a legal framework, i.e. a contract, for your work on the journal, your responsibilities, those of the society, etc.”

I also sought COPE’s guidance. COPE’s advice, [15] was for a case that was presented to it anonymously:

“COPE advised that, under normal circumstances, the editor should have complete editorial independence,.....The members of the society could be invited to respond or submit a discussion paper if they so choose after the paper has been published. However, the editor told COPE that there were legal issues involved. Hence COPE advised that if publication is likely to result in legal repercussions, then the editor may feel that he does not wish to publish. He could ask the society for legal advice. As the situation is complicated by legal issues, if the editor feels uncomfortable about publishing the paper, then he should not publish. In general, and going forward, COPE advised that if there are no legal issues, it is critically important for an editor to have autonomy, in terms of what gets published in the journal, and the editor should strive to establish this for the journal for the future.”

Note: “Advice from COPE is specific to the particular case under consideration and may not necessarily be applicable
to similar cases either past or future. COPE accepts no liability for any loss or damage caused or occasioned as a result of advice given by them or by any COPE member. Advice given by COPE is not given for the purposes of court proceedings within any jurisdiction and may not be cited or relied upon for this purpose.”

**My opinion**

Contrary to the editors of many other journals, the editor of AP J Psychol Med is elected by the members of the society. My society does not interfere in the work of the editor if it thinks he is doing his job well. “The members (of the society) give him certain responsibilities and powers……A learned society should give full editorial independence to the editor, within the framework of its constitution……. Editor of a biomedical journal is not like a journalist, who can publish something just because it is sensational. He should publish only that which is scientifically sound. Journalist looks for controversies, editor looks for validity.” [16] It is an undeniable fact that a journal gets its standing because of its affiliation with the society. Compared to independent journals, society owned journals are considered prestigious. The editor cannot say he will publish whatever he wants. Apart from his responsibility towards science, he should also consider the risks that may arise out of publishing a manuscript; hence he should ensure adequate peer review and involve everyone concerned in the decision making. He is also responsible towards the community which the journal serves. ‘At no point of time, the interest of science should overtake the interest of society (i.e. community),’ [17]

**CONCLUSIONS**

The editor needs to be objective, unbiased and neutral. Tough editorial decisions may establish the authority of the editor, but he may lose his close friends. Thus, it may not be a win-win situation for him. Anyway, editor is neither a friend nor an enemy; he works for science and this should be his prime concern. The editors should “aspire to impartiality, open-mindedness, and intellectual honesty. They must try to select material for its merit, interest to readers, and originality alone. They also want their journals to have a voice and a personality. If they are doing their jobs well, they should give no favours, and they should have no friends.” [10]  

“Problems arise when editors publish material that offends powerful individuals or groups, but that’s exactly why editorial independence is needed. Journals should be on the side of the powerless not the powerful, the governed not the governors. If readers once hear that important, relevant, and well argued articles are being suppressed or that articles are published simply to fulfil hidden political agendas, then the credibility of the publication collapses — and everybody loses.”


In this manuscript the term ‘journal’ indicates ‘biomedical journal’ and ‘society’ means the owner, society, organization or association that owns the journal

The AP J Psychol Med is a member of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), The World Association of Medical Editors (WAME), The European Association of Science Editors (EASE) and the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE). The journal confirms to the publication guidelines set forth by these and other national and international organizations.

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