

Calling a spade a spade... why editors are uncomfortable to say it as it is

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Scientific writing calls scientists to say the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. But in reality, try writing that and the chances are that your work will not get published;—at least not until it is said the way editors want it to be said. I learnt this the hard way, and still continue to be amazed at the many ways in which uncomfortable truths are refused to be accepted for publication. My first experience was when I was asked to review a textbook of pharmacology authored by a well-known pharmacologist. As I was still wet behind the ears and not yet learnt how to review a book without reading every page, I actually read the textbook from start to finish, made copious notes, wrote a verbose book review and submitted it. Months passed and I was eagerly waiting for it to be published. The waiting got to me and I finally got the courage to ask the editor what happened to the book review. The editor said, “look Gitanjali, we cannot publish this as he is a very powerful person... he will probably sit in on your interviews or will be an expert for your promotion. He will also be on committees which review research proposals for grants. Publishing this will not only affect you but me too. You have virtually accused him of copying (at that time plagiarism was something I did not know anything about) from the book Katzung (which the author had done) and this can have bad repercussions...” This was my first exposure to the world of scientific publication and the fact that editors are not comfortable calling a spade a spade. Much later, I came to know of similar problems faced by authors across the globe.^[1]

WHY DOES THIS OCCUR?

Many editors have done and continue to do an excellent job and provide their readers with carefully chosen papers to inform, enlighten, stimulate, inspire, and enthuse scientists all over the world. With the ‘publish or perish’ scenario firmly in place even in India, the importance bestowed on editors by academicians, often gives them a ‘super star’ status. While most of the editors whom I know personally (and I know quite a few) have their feet firmly planted on the ground, there are others who behave very much like self-styled dictators. These black sheep, who have sometimes been thrust in their roles due to circumstances other than merit, are afraid of raising controversies lest they rock their own boat. Hence any paper with the faint scent of a controversy is immediately rejected as being ‘out of scope’ for their journal. Editors are also known for their ‘cronyism’. Some will go to any lengths to defend (or protect) a paper by one of their cronies and will refuse to accept any criticism of it.^[1] If you dare criticize a paper written by a friend of the editor—you could be ostracized as a trouble maker. In India, most editors are part-time editors, juggling a job, family, and journal. All of them realize that there is a life outside the journal and will not want to jeopardize that. Hence, if you want to criticize one of their friends, the chances of it getting published are slim—even if you were correct.

Another reason for this problem, i.e., editors not wanting to publish controversial stuff, is that editors are answerable to the societies to which the journal belongs. Societies worry about their image as perceived by the public, government, and the scientific community. The governing members of the societies also rely on the other members to elect them as office bearers, positions often sought and fought with remarkable tenacity. These members will promptly want to

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be seen to react and censor anything faintly critical of their society,^[2] and may easily get an editor to conform with their views or else get fired.^[3] George Lundberg who had been the editor of the Journal of American Medical Association for 17 years was fired in 1999 by the American Medical Association over a decision to publish a paper which the association thought was done to extract leverage in a political situation.^[4] In 2006, the Canadian Medical Association fired its chief editor and another senior editor of the Canadian Medical Association Journal, over issues of editorial independence.^[3] These and many more examples are available of exemplary editors being sacked for doing what they believed was true.^[3,5] But what about those editors who are ready to toe the line of the societies? Editors who are ready to pander to the whims and fancies of professional organizations need not necessarily be bad—but they could be, without seeming to be so. Since much of editorial cutting and editing occurs in confidence among the author, editor, and referees, it is hard to know what actually happens—what gets published and what gets rejected. This is the real danger.

I once wrote a paper on academic dishonesty and submitted it for publication. I got two types of comments from the referees. One was that I was always saying something negative (which is really true, given the large numbers of editorials I have written about plagiarism, scientific misconduct, poor standard of examinations, etc.) and the second was that I did not have proof of academic misconduct occurring in medical colleges in India. The peer reviewers kept commenting that I should not sound negative—which was really difficult considering that I was writing on such a depressing topic, and were insisting I give evidence (this was in relation to my comment that bus loads of medical teachers were being transported from one institute to another during inspections by the Medical Council of India). Just when the last date for submission of the paper for review came to a close, the newspapers splashed photographs of buses with faculty being transferred to another medical college to satisfy the number of medical teachers required to get approval by the MCI. I had got my evidence at last! But what I want to say here is, why were the reviewers waiting for proof when the whole of the medical fraternity (including themselves—I am sure) knew this was happening? Do we not trust someone to speak the truth or is it just to save their editorial reputation? Had the newspaper articles not been published, would I have been asked to cut it out from my manuscript? Probably yes. Had that happened an important unethical act, sanctioned by the state government would never have been documented.

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF THIS PROBLEM?

Prominent scientists will be well insulated from being criticized

by their peers, especially the lesser known ones.^[1] Real issues such as not having declared conflicts of interest, plagiarism, data fudging, and fraud will be swept under the carpet with ease. Papers with good quality work which is ahead of its time will not get published because the editors ‘think’ the work is not good enough or the reviewers cannot understand the line of thought or the scientific method.^[6] If you are a junior author you could be bullied into including a senior author’s name as insulation (yes, it happened to me) against imagined criticism. Perhaps the worst thing that happens is that the truth gets distorted and the audience (the readers) are given a version of what the editor (or the society to which the journal belongs) wants you to hear and not what the author wants to say.^[3] Few authors will have the resources to try and fight back against editors.^[1]

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE?

While journals publish papers that are accepted by them, nothing is known about which papers were rejected. Like the rationale behind the clinical trial registry, perhaps journals should have registries of papers rejected by them. Very few journals have an ombudsman, which leaves the editor free to do as he or she wants. This could be made one of the mandatory requirements of a scientific journal, which would allow authors the clout for redressal. Maybe the time has come for medical journals to go along with what physicists have done—a one-stop shop for articles of all types.^[7] Some of the international journals (the really big ones) regularly commission papers, calling on well-known names and contacts months ahead of publication to write papers for them. This also works the other way around, with international experts (especially those working in prestigious institutions), corresponding with editors and sending them a draft of their planned paper and asking whether they will be interested in publishing such a manuscript. This serves the interests of both parties—the researcher, who knows that the chances of the editor regretting the paper is thin and the editor who can continue to publish papers by the big names. What falls on the way side are the unknown researchers who really have a story to tell which no one wants to hear. This practice must be stopped as there is no level playing field.

“TELL ALL THE TRUTH BUT TELL IT SLANT”...

A couple of months ago, I sent a manuscript to a journal for publication and was taken aback at the vitriolic personal comments by one of the referees who apparently knew I had written the paper in the first place. This referee was not commenting on my work but more on the lines of ‘how dare you criticize the work of this group of people...’. While I would have been perfectly happy to correct any mistakes in my manuscript what I did not like was being asked to present

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it in a manner which was not the truth. I was asked to tone down language, not call mistakes as errors, and gloss over all the negative issues pointed out by me. I believe that if a writer points out the major flaws in a document in the public domain it is the 'duty' of the editor to say it as it is (of course after independently checking the facts). Why should it be presented as if the mistakes were minor cosmetic blemishes? Barbara Ehrenreich in a thought provoking lecture titled "Smile or die" focuses on the darker side of positive thinking and theorises that 'mandatory optimism' may in fact be harmful and have serious consequences.^[8] The need to find something nice to say even when there is nothing good to say is alien to our culture, where Hindu mythology describes a court poet, Nakkeeran, having the gall to criticize a poem written by Lord Shiva himself! And so I hope editors will stop bending over backward to sound positive even when there is nothing good to say about something. I hope they will let me publish what I want to say, the way I want to say it—and not how they want me to say it. Perhaps some of the editors believe and subscribe to this poem by Emily Dickinson.

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise
As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind

The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind

Emily Dickinson

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