

Chapter 16

Editorial Ethics

Several chapters of this book have touched on the ethical responsibilities of the authors: how to properly cite the work of others (Chapter 5), how to determine who belongs on the list of authors (Chapter 13), and how to avoid plagiarism (Chapter 14) and double publication (Chapter 15), among other topics (Chapter 12). But in the peer-review process, authors are not the only ones with ethical responsibilities. Editors and reviewers have important obligations as well. In Chapter 10, I briefly described the responsibilities of the authors, editors, and reviewers. Here, I will go into more detail on the ethical responsibilities of editors.

16.1 Editors' Responsibilities

Although there are many ways to summarize the ethical duties of the editors of a peer-reviewed scientific journal, the following is a list of seven items that I think covers the main points:

1. Provide a transparent process for editorial review, and deviate from that process only under exceptional circumstances.

As an example of transparency, Chapter 10 describes the *Journal of Micro/Nanolithography, MEMS, and MOEMS* (JM³) editorial process in detail. To my knowledge, we have not deviated from that process since its publication in 2015. While tweaks to this process are likely to occur in the future, JM³ will publish any noteworthy changes when needed.

2. Deal fairly and respectfully with all parties in the publishing process.

Editors and publishers should be committed to fair and respectful treatment of both authors and reviewers, and expect the same from authors and reviewers in their treatment of editors and staff. Any behavior that does not rise to the highest standards should be reported to the editor-in-chief and/or to the publisher.

3. Recuse yourself when dealing with a manuscript for which you have a conflict of interest—let a non-conflicted editor handle the submission and make the decisions.

Some conflicts are easy to recognize, such as when one or more of the authors works for the same company/organization as the editor. Other conflicts are not so clear-cut, as when the editor feels a competitive threat (commercially or professionally) from the work being submitted or has a strong personal tie to an author. I rely on my editors to honestly assess their own potential conflicts and to discuss with me any questionable cases.

4. Ensure that all details of a submission are kept confidential.

The software systems used to manage manuscripts through the submission, review, and publication process typically provide a standard level of security to ensure confidentiality. Beyond that, journals should instruct all of their editors to keep all information about a manuscript and its reviews and revisions confidential within the board of editors and publisher. Only after a paper has been published can the contents of that paper be discussed outside the editorial board. Even then, only published information can be discussed, with the details of reviews or revisions to remain confidential unless the authors decide to release them.

As an aside, many editors, myself included, submit manuscripts to the journals they are involved with. When an editor is an author of a submission, the manuscript is handled by other editors in such a way that the editor-author remains completely outside the review and decision process. In my case, any information about a manuscript I submit, including who is assigned as the associate editor and who performs the reviews, is redacted from the internal database we use to track manuscripts so that I cannot view such details (even if I am tempted to peek). I have submitted many papers to JM³ since I became editor-in-chief, and never once has this wall of confidentiality been breached.

5. Work assiduously for timely decisions.

Everyone wants the publication process to be speedy. At JM³, the median time from receipt of a manuscript to the first editorial decision was 10 weeks in 2008, but only 5 weeks in 2016. Unfortunately, some manuscripts take much longer, either because it is very hard to find reviewers or the reviewers are late in supplying their reviews. Sometimes delays are caused by editors who do not perform their duties quickly (our volunteer editors tend to be very busy people), but we continue to try to improve our performance in this regard. At the back end, the median time from acceptance to publication was 3.4 weeks in 2016 (down from 14 weeks in 2008), due to the time required for copyediting, typesetting, and the somewhat variable time for author page-proof review. Technological changes have greatly sped up this last step.

6. Choose reviewers who are likely to provide fair, unbiased, high-quality, and timely reviews.

Generally, editors have been chosen for their knowledge in important fields covered by the scope of the journal. In many cases, a manuscript covers a familiar

topic, and the editor responsible for handling the submission can seek reviewers who are known to be unbiased experts. In other cases, we may have to deal with reviewers we do not personally know. An editor's greatest frustration is non-responsive reviewers (either because they do not respond to a request to become a reviewer or they do not submit their review on time after agreeing to review). I am not sure how to solve this problem, other than asking reviewers to treat the process the way they wish to be treated as authors.

7. Hold all parties in the publishing process to the highest ethical standards.

JM³ is a member of COPE, the Committee on Publication Ethics. As such, I am committed to following the COPE code of conduct for journal editors.¹ This code of conduct describes the basic principles of serving the needs of both authors and readers with integrity while promoting our journal's mission of furthering scientific knowledge.

16.2 Conclusions

Editors, reviewers, and authors work together with the shared goal of furthering science through the publication process. The best results come when these parties work together in a spirit of mutual respect and cooperation, keeping the reader as the center of their concern. As such, each of these players has ethical responsibilities to the others. While most of this book has been focused on authors and what they need to keep in mind when writing a good scientific paper, it is useful to remind editors of their ethical responsibilities as well.

References

¹ Committee on Publication Ethics, "Code of Conduct and Best Practice Guidelines for Journal Editors", version 4 (2011).