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Editorial Ethics

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Editorial Ethics

Over the last several years, I have been writing a series of editorials on the topic of how to write a good science paper. Several of those editorials have touched on the ethical responsibilities of the authors: how to properly cite the work of others,¹ how to determine who belongs on the list of authors,² and how to avoid plagiarism³ and double publication,⁴ among other topics. But in the peer review process, authors aren't the only ones with ethical responsibilities. Editors and reviewers have important obligations as well. In a prior editorial on the peer review process, I briefly described the responsibilities of the authors, editors, and reviewers.⁵ Here I'll go into more detail on the ethical responsibilities of editors and our commitment to those responsibilities at JM³.

The Editors' Responsibilities

While there are many ways to summarize the ethical duties of the editors of a peer-reviewed science journal, here 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.

Two years ago I described the JM³ editorial process in detail.⁵ To my knowledge, we have not deviated from that process since then. While tweaks to this process are likely to occur in the future, JM³ will describe any noteworthy changes in a subsequent editorial when needed.

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

I and the SPIE journal staff are committed to fair and respectful treatment of both authors and reviewers, and expect the same from authors and reviewers in their treatment of JM³ editors and staff. Any behavior that doesn't rise to the highest standards can be reported to me and/or SPIE. Information about confidential reporting of problems to SPIE can be found here: spie.org/contact-us.

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 provide a standard level of security to ensure confidentiality. Beyond that, we instruct all of our editors to keep all information about a manuscript and its reviews and revisions confidential within the board of editors and SPIE staff. 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 of the JM³ editors, myself included, submit manuscripts to JM³. 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 of 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 don't perform their duties quickly (our volunteer editors tend to be very busy people), but we continue to try to improve our performance on this regard. At the back end, the median time from acceptance to publication was 3.4 weeks in 2016, due to time required for copyediting, typesetting, and the somewhat variable time for author page proof review.

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

All of the JM³ editors have been chosen for their knowledge in important fields covered by the scope of our 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 are not personally familiar

with. An editor's greatest frustration is nonresponsive 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'm 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.⁶ 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. I'm proud of what JM³ has accomplished since its founding in 2002 and excited about continued improvements in the journal. I would be

grateful for any feedback that our readers and authors might have for us.

Chris Mack
Editor-in-Chief

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