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Editorial

Do Editors Make a Difference?

Who makes science? Researchers do, obviously, but other people help. The funding bodies and other organisations who provide financial support, and who invariably also dictate to some extent the agenda of what can be researched. The universities and other institutions who set the conditions under which researchers operate. And also the publishers of scientific journals and books, because it's not science until you tell someone about it.

These days it's possible to disseminate your work simply by putting it on a website, avoiding the whole process of submitting a paper and having it reviewed, criticised and altered by various people. There is of course a practical motivation for most of us to work with the journals: we need to demonstrate the validity and quality of our work in order to establish our scientific credentials, important when it comes to getting a job, obtaining a promotion or competing for funding. But leaving these issues aside, we might ask: do the editors, reviewers and publishers actually help to make science better, or not?

That's a big question and one that could be debated endlessly. Let me make the case for the role of the editor. Before I became an editor, it seemed to me that editors didn't really do very much. Reviewers were the people who expressed opinions about my work, which I may or may not agree with, and who had to be convinced, placated or argued with until, hopefully, they gave the thumbs up. The editor seemed to be merely an intermediary, a messenger between myself and the reviewers. And indeed some editors are little more than that. But a good editor can make a difference.

I'm not sure that I'd say I'm a good editor. I certainly make mistakes and I'm only too aware that often I have to make decisions with limited information, on a short timescale. But today I had two experiences showing how the editor's handling of a paper can have an effect. In both cases the papers concerned were good, the reviewers liked them, but they had some doubts. My impression was that they were saying: "If this work is correct, then it's of importance, but is

it correct?". With these kinds of reviews, almost any decision could be justified. But reviewers also gave suggestions for further analysis of the data, and further experiments that could be conducted to firm up the hypothesis being tested. Armed with this information, I was able to go back to the authors and advise them that, yes, we were very interested in publishing this paper, but we would encourage them to carry out further work, however long it might take, to confirm the findings and produce something of real significance.

Another way in which the editor makes a difference is the decision to reject a manuscript before review. Getting it wrong means losing a potentially good paper, but getting it right saves one from wasting reviewers' time and goodwill (which is a precious commodity), allows the authors to move on and maybe submit elsewhere, and helps to define the house style of the journal.

Despite huge changes in the way that information moves around the world, the peer-reviewed paper is still the basis of scientific discourse, and seems set to continue as such in the foreseeable future. I could sum up the role of the editor as follows: if the science is good, a bad editor can't ruin it; they may delay it a little, but good work will eventually see the light of day. But a good editor can make good work better, and better presented, and can encourage those whose work is not quite good enough to improve it.

Having said all that, and perhaps blown my own trumpet too much, I should emphasise the obvious point that without good reviewers, the editor can do nothing. I have been pleasantly surprised, and sometimes frankly amazed by the time, effort and thought which many reviewers put into their work. Long may it continue!

Editor in Chief
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