



Doi: 10.21608/JHPEI.2023.249298.1004

**EDITORIAL**

**Open Access**

# The Ethics of Editorship

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In a recent invited commentary for a different journal, about the ethics of scholarship in health professions education research, I proposed that ethics include the protection of the integrity of science, the integrity of research subjects and the integrity of authorship.(1) In all three areas ethical principles can be formulated and researchers must be aware of nine potential breaches of ethics that risk damaging the research enterprise, with severe consequences. What I did not stress much is how important editors are as gate keepers of the ethics of research. This editorial is about the ethics of editorship.

It is an honour for me to be invited to join the board of Honorary Editors of a new journal in the health professions, and I offered to write an editorial for the first issue of Journal of Health Professions Education and Innovation of the Egyptian Society of Medical Education. There are reasons for this offer.

First, just as I have suggested for honorary authorships with articles, an editor, honorary or not, should be more than a name on a website. While honorary authorships should always be avoided(2), honorary editorship is different, but should, I believe, still include efforts to support its purpose, such as... writing an editorial about keeping up the quality of editorship.

Let me start with an example of good editorship. As a corresponding author of a complex mixed methods study on burnout among medical students, that took five years from data collection to manuscript submission, I recently received a rejection from a respected journal, after an initial revision-and-resubmission decision. My initial disappointment turned into respect for the editor, who was able to point at significant weaknesses and had taken the time to make and explain a true expert editorial decision. I will not go into details, but it showed the true greatness of an editor

to question 'does this really advance our knowledge?'(3) I learned, not only about our project, but also about editorial work.

Now some other examples. In the past year I have witnessed cases of questionable editorship. Early 2023 I was approached to act, with a team, as a Collection Editor for papers about "Advances in Entrustable Professional Activities" in an open access journal. This journal is one of a large conglomerate of journals, that started in 1999 and now is a large brand with over 300 journals. It was bought by a large scientific publishing company in 2008. I have found that what once started as a true ethical enterprise, in order to give the world free access to science, without payment, to read the work of researchers who are paid to do research through tax money, has now turned into a commercial enterprise, with questionable editorial procedures, and skyrocketed fees to be paid by authors to publish their work. In lower-income parts of the world where everyone can now read these journals, researchers can no longer show their own work in the same journals, hampered by high author fees (currently \$ 2500.- for one paper in journal that approached me to be a collection editor). The big publisher's business model has shifted from collecting subscription fees to acquiring as many manuscripts from paying authors as possible. Every new paper generates revenue, and, since printed journals are disappearing, it is beneficial to accept many papers. This affects the ethics of the editorial process. After I and my colleagues had accepted the invitation to edit the above Collection, we discovered that we were not expected to select reviewers and make the final editorial decisions, but mostly to serve as flags to attract papers. As we found that unacceptable, we were negotiated to be granted associate editor roles. Yet, final decisions were still made by higher level editors. We found there was quite some editor turnover. In total, including personnel changes in the first months of our task, we interacted with no less than seven individuals in various editorial

**How to cite this article**

Cate, Olle ten. "The Ethics of Editorship." J Health Prof Edu Innov, Vol. 1, no. 1, Jan 2024, pp 2-4.  
Doi: 10.21608/JHPEI.2023.249298.1004

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roles for the journal. I looked for their scholarly records and found that none of them had published about health professions education (HPE); I wondered: how can they be editors of HPE journal? We also faced the odd general rule for associate editors that "manuscripts should be assessed on whether they are scientifically valid and technically sound; not on perceived importance or significance". I believe that to be an interference in the ethics of the editorial process. The editorial decision that I cited above as a good example (rejection because the study adds not enough to what we already know) would have been against this rule.

My experiences may hold for other open access conglomerate journals. One paper that we rejected because of a strong suspicion that it was fully generated by artificial intelligence had a first author from an orthopedics department of a hospital that did not list this person as an employee. The same author had just published another, 376 word, 'editorial' article in an open access neurology journal from a different conglomerate, that I found similarly suspicious. I contacted the handling editor of that paper who admitted to me that there had been a very quick review (as per the journal's policy), but she also found it, in hindsight, concerning. Likewise, I was invited to submit an opinion paper to a pharmacy journal from again another conglomerate, which was properly reviewed. However, one request was to expand the 1500 opinion paper "to at least 2000 words". The only reason was journal policy, not because anything was missing in the paper. I resisted, as I found that editorially unethical.

The ethics of editorship regards the editor's primary role in decisions that truly support the ethics of research, that is, guarding the integrity of science, research subjects and authorship. Here are some rules I believe an editor may follow. Editors, in their decision-making should avoid conflicts of interest, maintain confidentiality of the editorial process, exercise fairness towards submissions in the review process, exercise fairness towards readers by accepting only papers that advance the state-of-the-art, and avoid requesting that authors cite papers from the journal, as an implicit condition for publication.(4) The editor must read the paper and form an opinion, and should not blindly follow reviewer recommendations, but add a few lines of opinion when requesting a revision, and justify a rejection.

A strong journal editor, and their deputy and associate editors, are not the extension of a publisher and must, if needed, make decisions that may not always be in the best interest of the publisher. They should feel accountable not to the publisher, but to the scientific community they serve. That, on the longer term, strengthens a journal. I must admit that my experiences in the past year have not made me enthusiastic to send more work to open access journals with questionable

editorial and financial policies. I am not talking about the so-called predatory journals(5), but also some journals with reasonable reputation, like the ones the I referred to above.

Being an editor is not always easy. For example, the distinction between original contributions, and work, fully fabricated with generative artificial intelligence tools requires smart editorial investigation, specifically with articles that do not involve data collection. That is worth the effort, as the editor is also responsible to preserve the integrity of authorship. Here are some tips in case of suspicion that I have used in the past year: (a) look at the reference list: were these references you would expect to see? (b) look at the colophon: was author XX "responsible for data collection and/or data analysis" if there was actually no data collection? (c) trace the author(s) on Google Scholar: have they published before in this area? (d) look at language; paradoxically, an impeccable language, from a group of non-native authors, might add to the suspicion. Such fraud may not easily be disclosed with certainty, but high suspicion may still be a reason for rejection. This is what we decided for the suspicious article mentioned above.

The new Journal of Health Professions Education and Innovation is well positioned to serve this quality purpose. It is open access, it has a low author processing cost, and it is published by a society for medical education, rather than a commercial publisher. To attract high quality authors and manuscripts, the editor and the editorial team should be respected member of the scientific community and devote sufficient time and energy into careful and wise, and independent, editorial decisions and processes. After the Netherlands Journal for Medical Education turned into the internationally acknowledged Perspectives on Medical Education in 2012(6), the new Editor-in-Chief established a high quality international editorial team, which to a large extent helped building this now successful and highly respected journal.

I wish the new Journal of Health Professions Education and Innovation success in this endeavor and predict a bright future if a high level of editorial quality and ethics can be established and maintained.

#### **Key words:**

editor, ethics, journal quality, open access, APC

Received: 16-11-2023 Accepted: 27-11-2023

Published Online: January 2024

#### **Conflict of interests:**

The author declares having no conflict of interest.



**Funding:**

No funding

**Authors contributions:**

OtC conceived and wrote the text

**Competing interests:**

The author has no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose. The author has no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article. The author certifies that has no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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