

Editorial

Ensuring Manuscript Quality and Preserving Authorial Voice: The Balancing Act of Editors

Eric W. K. Tsang

University of Texas at Dallas, USA

A commonly perceived role of the journal editor is that of a gatekeeper who guards against poor-quality manuscripts, flawed arguments, inappropriate research methods, or worse still, plagiarism or other kinds of academic misconduct (Aguinis & Vaschetto, 2011; Konrad, 2008). To achieve that objective, the editor relies on advice from knowledgeable reviewers and rejects manuscripts that fail to meet the quality standards of the journal. For manuscripts that manage to pass through several rounds of review and are eventually published, the authors are normally required to make changes based on the comments made by the editor and reviewers. Most authors would try to comply with the changes requested. A key assumption of the review process is that such changes are necessary for ensuring manuscript quality. However, this assumption is questionable (Tsang & Frey, 2007). Further, some of the changes may go against the authors' will and obstruct the free expression of their ideas. That said, as journals should publish error-free manuscripts, here free expression of authors' ideas only applies to ideas that are not erroneous. The term 'error' is used also to refer to confusions or ambiguities as authors should present not only flawless but also clear arguments.

I draw on my experience as author, reviewer, and Senior Editor of *Management and Organization Review* (MOR), and argue that the current journal review process does not necessarily safeguard the quality of published manuscripts and that authors should be given more voice in deciding the changes they would like to make. Moreover, I emphasize the role of the editor in mediating this process of 'give and take' between authors and reviewers. This requires some adjustment of the mindset of reviewers in providing comments and of authors in responding to these comments. As a mediator between authors and reviewers, editors play an important role in balancing between ensuring manuscript quality and preserving authorial voice. In brief, an effective and fruitful review process requires a tri-party effort.

THE MYTH AND REALITY OF THE JOURNAL REVIEW PROCESS

The journal review process is characterized as a double-blind peer review. 'Double-blind' refers to the arrangement that reviewers do not know the identities of authors and vice versa. The purpose is 'to ensure the fairness, neutrality, and objectivity of the review' (Chen, 2011: 429). The word 'peer' implies that the reviewers are at least as knowledgeable as the authors with respect to the topic of the manuscript under review (Roth, 2002). The reviewers, who possess a similar or higher level of expertise as the authors, provide objective and constructive comments on the manuscript. After reading the manuscript and the reviewers' comments, the editor makes an informed and fair editorial decision, summarizing the reviewers' comments and providing additional suggestions on areas of improvement that the reviewers might have missed. If the manuscript successfully passes through the first round of review, the authors have to address all the comments in their revision. Assuming that the quality of the review is good and the authors are able to incorporate useful suggestions in refining their arguments or analyses, the quality of the manuscript should be improved after several rounds of revision before it is finally accepted.

Under this process, to increase the chance of acceptance, authors may reluctantly make changes that, in their opinion, do not enhance the quality of their manuscripts. For instance, a reviewer requests that a hypothesis that was not supported be dropped whereas the authors are of the opinion that this will slightly weaken the coherence of the theoretical framework, since the non-significant result could be due to issues other than the theory itself. Moreover, different reviewers may evaluate the same manuscript from different perspectives and thus provide diverse, if not contradictory, comments. When most of the comments are integrated into the manuscript, the final product may look like a committee report rather than a cohesive research report.

While the 'double-blind' feature of the process is usually maintained, the 'peer' feature is absent from time to time. One of the hardest tasks of my job as editor is to find two qualified reviewers for each manuscript. They should be experienced researchers who are familiar with the topic of the manuscript and preferably have some knowledge of Chinese management, which is a focus of most *MOR* articles. As the number of management journals and the number of submissions to these journals have been increasing over the last two decades, experienced researchers are overwhelmed by review requests. Many of them, including myself, are editorial review board members of several journals, and have to decline some of the review invitations. As the pool of experienced reviewers becomes a rare and valuable resource (Tsui & Hollenbeck, 2009), more and more reviews are carried out by less experienced researchers.

Contrary to Hempel's (2014) advice given in this editorial forum that a review should identify both the strengths and weaknesses of a manuscript, many reviewers,

especially less experienced ones, tend to engage in the so-called SLAM (Stressing the Limiting Aspects of Manuscripts) mode of review, in which they give harsh comments that highlight the shortcomings of a manuscript (Van Lange, 1999). Coupled with the above problem concerning the expertise of reviewers, such comments may not be valid. If authors obediently incorporate all comments into their manuscript in each round of revision, it is likely that the final product not only fails to truly express their own ideas but also contains errors.

In summary, there are desirable improvements to be made in the current journal review process for ensuring high-quality manuscripts being published while at the same time not obstructing the expression of authors' valid ideas. In the next section, I describe a process that *MOR* editors strive to follow, and that aims to achieve the dual goals of enhancing the quality of the manuscripts while preserving the voice of the authors.

AN IMPROVED REVIEW PROCESS

The review process that *MOR* tries to achieve will require some adjustment of the mindset of reviewers in offering review comments and of authors in addressing these comments. To make this process possible, editors have to take an active role in facilitating the dialogue between authors and reviewers and adjudicating conflicts about whether certain review comments should be followed. The objective is to bring out authors' conceptual and/or empirical contributions that match the *MOR* standards for rigour and academic relevance (see Daft & Lewin, 2008).

Open-minded Reviewers

We encourage reviewers to be more 'open-minded'. After accepting a review request, the very first thing reviewers should bear in mind is that (1) the manuscript in question is not their work, and (2) the authors are solely responsible for every single word in the manuscript when it is published. The basic role of reviewers is to advise the editor concerning the publishability of a manuscript. In carrying out this role, reviewers provide comments that aim at improving the manuscript. If the manuscript successfully passes through the first round of review, reviewers should not be obstinate in requiring authors to follow 'their' comments in revising the manuscript. It is not acceptable to retaliate noncompliance with further negative feedback and recommendation for rejecting the manuscript.

We would expect a more open-minded attitude. That is, reviewers should adopt an improvement-focused approach when providing comments but an error-focused approach when checking compliance. When reviewers find that authors do not accede to a certain comment, they should ask themselves the question: is the comment about an error or a suggestion for improving the manuscript? If it is the latter, reviewers should let the authors decide how their manuscript is to be

presented, especially if a similar comment was not made by other reviewers. Note that a suggestion that is forced upon the receiver is not a suggestion but a command. Moreover, it is a rather subjective judgement as to whether a certain change, such as placing one idea before another, is an improvement, or whether a literature review is comprehensive enough. The final polishing of a paper is the job of the authors, not the reviewers, with the help of the editor. Of course, reviewers should not refrain from suggesting ideas to further improve the paper, with the understanding that the authors reserve the right to decide how best to incorporate the suggestions.

If the comment concerns an error, reviewers have to ask a further question: am I an expert on that issue? If the answer is 'yes' and they do not agree to the explanation provided by the authors for not accepting the comment, they should pursue the matter further in their review. On the other hand, if reviewers have limited expertise in the matter, they should defer the matter to the editor, since reviewers would not know if the authors are senior or junior, or have the expertise to correct the error. Unless the authors' explanation is clearly flawed, they should give the authors the benefit of doubt. It is ethically questionable for reviewers to demand authors to make a change that may be wrong. Don't forget that in case the change turns out to be a mistake, the authors, not the reviewers, will be held accountable.

Assertive Authors

On the part of authors, more assertiveness and confidence is desired. First, on the ethics side, if authors have reservations about some of the changes but still reluctantly make them, this violates the principle that a manuscript should consist of its authors' ideas. Readers presume that authors agree to every idea presented in their manuscript. Violating this presumption amounts to telling lies on the part of authors. However, if an idea comes from a reviewer and the author willingly adopts it, the principle is not violated. In fact, a main purpose of journal review is to provide authors with ideas for improvement. If it is an important idea, the authors should acknowledge in the manuscript that the idea was provided by a reviewer. Second, if one of the reluctant changes, whether conceptual or methodological, happens to be erroneous, authors run the risk of having their reputation tarnished. In fact, if they know in advance that the change is incorrect, they should not make it and should consult the editor instead. Knowingly including an error in a manuscript is an act of academic misconduct. As mentioned, authors bear the sole responsibility for every single word in their manuscript. They cannot shift the blame to the reviewer who suggested the change. As a matter of fact, they do not even know the reviewer's identity. Hence, it is morally right and professionally correct for authors not to make changes, especially important changes, to which they do not agree.

Junior scholars may not have the confidence to defend their positions when challenged by reviewers. However, they can start building this confidence by first adopting the error-focused approach recommended to reviewers. That is, if the comment is about, say, a style of presentation, they would accept it unless they have a strong rationale against it. Since they are inexperienced in organizing their ideas, the comment may indeed be useful for strengthening the presentation. If the comment is about an error to which they do not agree, they should not just dismiss it. They have to conduct further investigation or analysis. If the result of the investigation or analysis indicates that the comment is flawed, they should politely communicate it in their response to the comment. Reviewers generally appreciate authors taking their suggestions seriously. Engaging in academic dialogue is an essential part of this profession. Authors should consider the response a learning opportunity. Possessing skillful negotiation techniques also helps, and authors would benefit from Liu's (2014) discussion of 'revise and resubmit' as an integrative negotiation in this editorial forum for developing such skills. Finally, as discussed in the next section, the role of editors is critical to the success of implementing this improved review process.

Editors as Mediators

Editors are often perceived as siding with reviewers (Starbuck, 2003). This is not surprising as both editors and reviewers are often regarded as gatekeepers of the journals with which they are associated. It is also not always true. We want our authors to know that the editor's job is not to reject papers but to find papers that they can publish. To protect authorial voice, editors should play a more neutral role. An editor is a mediator who facilitates the dialogue between authors and reviewers, sorts out conflicts, if any, which arise from the dialogue, and help authors to develop the paper for eventual publication.

A commonly recognized duty of editors is to provide guidance to authors when the comments made by different reviewers would develop the manuscript in different directions or when these comments are inconsistent or even contradictory (Jacobs, 2008). Another important duty is to inform authors that a review comment is flawed. This will save the authors the predicament of having to tell the reviewer that he or she is wrong. For example, recently I was in charge of a *MOR* submission that passed through the first round of review. One reviewer cast doubt on the authors' interpretation of one regression coefficient. My statistical knowledge suggested that the author's interpretation was correct. I communicated this to the authors in my editorial letter and at the same time asked them to explain the rationale of their interpretation in the revised manuscript. Open-minded reviewers should welcome such editorial feedback as a learning opportunity.

In a typical 'revise and resubmit' editorial letter, we usually write a statement saying that authors have the option of not following some of the review comments.

This message really means that non-compliance with good reasons will not affect the chance of acceptance. Most, if not all, editors would aim at developing manuscripts to their fullest potential before they are accepted. In contrast to this ‘reach for the sky’ attitude, a ‘meet the standards’ attitude would be more appropriate when dealing with authors who decline to accept certain review comments. If the comment does not concern an error and the quality of the manuscript has met the standards of the journal, the editor should give the authors the freedom of expressing their ideas in their own ways. In particular, this should be the case if the editor is not an authority on the topic of the manuscript, the reviewers deem the paper publishable and the authors are experts with proven research accomplishments on the topic. It makes sense to accept the manuscript and let the research community judge its quality than to obstruct the authorial voice.

When authors and reviewers cannot reach agreement concerning a comment that is about an error, editors should check the publications and citations of all the authors and reviewers and assess their levels of expertise with respect to the issue concerned. If necessary, outside help should be sought.

CONCLUSION

The bottom line of an editor’s job is to publish error-free manuscripts that contribute significantly to the literature, based on the recommendations of reviewers and the editor’s own evaluation of the manuscript. At the same time, published manuscripts should truly reflect their authors’ ideas. As long as the bottom line is met, these two objectives – ensuring manuscript quality and preserving authorial voice – are not in conflict. Putting aside the ethics issue, demanding authors to accept virtually all review comments does not necessarily improve manuscript quality. Conversely, letting authors freely choose the comments that they would like to incorporate into their manuscripts may result in tighter and more coherent arguments. When editors properly mediate between reviewers’ expectations that authors follow their comments and authors’ rights to freely express their ideas, both objectives are achievable. The job of editors will be made easier if reviewers are more open-minded toward authors’ treatment of their comments and if authors are more assertive in defending their ideas. This is the goal of *MOR*!

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