

The Editors in front of the syndrome “Publish or Perish”

In a flashback to mid '70s I could bring into my mind my first attempts to publish material from my research work while I was working towards my PhD thesis in Southampton University.

That time my supervisor, a Czech Professor, was insisting on completing the whole work first and then present the key findings of the entire work in an International Conference. Respecting his experience, I did exactly that. After the completion of my PhD thesis, we presented together a paper in the ICID Conference in Athens 1978 summarising the main outcomes of my research work of the previous four years.

This was the attitude of most academic people and researchers in Europe until recently. On the other side of the Atlantic, however, the attitude was totally different. The American attitude could be condensed in the slogan “Publish or Perish”, which pushed researchers to publish frequently regardless of the significance of their publications.

Gradually the American slogan became the prevailing opinion among academics and researchers worldwide. The ranking of universities, the status and even the salaries of academics were linked to the number of published papers, their quantity metrics, the impact factors of the journals etc. During the last decades this was spread to most countries of the world with even more profound effects in the academic community of the developing countries. It is amazing that during the recent years, the major bulk of papers, the international journals receive, come from India and China. The rate of submissions from these countries is following an exponential growth curve meaning that in the near future all journals will be flooded by manuscripts from these countries.

This boom of submitted papers had as a consequence the initiation of hundreds of new journals of different types, to accommodate this increasing demand. Some of these journals have very general or ambiguous scope. As a result this “inflation” brought about a general confusion regarding what is worth publishing, what is new and original and what material in each paper actually belongs to the authors.

In this new situation the burden of the Editors is critical. From the thousands of papers circulated to various journals they have to identify the quality papers which fulfil the criteria of originality and significance and at the same time to select those which advance the existing knowledge in the scientific field which they serve.

To achieve this difficult task (apart from some technological tools available) several items should be fulfilled:

- i) the Editors to pre-select the papers for the review process based on their own judgement before initiating the review process. This will substantially reduce the number of papers which need review.
- ii) the members of the Editorial Board of each Journal and the competent reviewers should be eager to thoroughly review papers which are selected after the screening of the Editor. To fulfil this, the voluntary basis of the current review procedure is inadequate.
- iii) the journals to consider papers strictly in the scientific area covered by their scope leaving other journals to cover reliably the area of their expertise.
- iv) Tiring repetitions of published material, big numbers of authors having an “industrial” production of papers by changing the rank of the authors, and articles the authors of which violate the ethics of publishing research, should be eliminated.

There are several initiatives which can be implemented to avoid some of the above malpractices. Among them, is the close cooperation of Editors of the prestigious journals for eliminating repetition and fraud. The ban of this kind of authors from these journals could be seen as a first step in this direction. However above all is the determination of the scientific community (regardless of the role: editor, reviewer, author) to fulfil its obligation to the society moving from quantity to quality criteria. The scientific community and the society have a lot to gain if this attitude prevails in publishing research in the future.

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