

Dimitrov, Kiril

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Kiril Dimitrov

Assoc. Prof. Dr.

Department: Industrial
Business, Faculty: Business
Faculty, UNWE, Bulgaria

Corresponding author/-s:

e-mail: kiril.dimitrov@unwe.bg

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5203-1840>

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OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES IN PUBLISHING AND PROMOTING SCIENTIFIC JOURNALS IN BULGARIA

ABSTRACT

Presentation of scientific papers is associated with the creation of new scientific journals and the maintenance of established periodicals. This paper discusses and analyzes two challenges to publishing scientific journals in Bulgaria – first, securing a pool of suitable reviewers and second – maintaining good relations with potential authors. The paper proposes views based on exponential thinking that would lead to profound, positive changes based on the use of new technologies in scientific journal publishing. In practice, they are inextricably linked to the implementation of social innovations, resulting from the establishment of a new balance among stakeholders at different levels of realization of management. The paper attempts to assist lecturers and researchers in their professional pursuits.

KEY WORDS

organizational culture, educational and research institutions, human resource management, exponential thinking.

JEL

M12, M14, I20

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary challenges facing the publishing of scientific journals in Bulgaria are no longer significantly different from those in developed economies, due to the advent of the Internet and the digitalization of many of the related activities, the resulting opportunities to minimize some of the costs in this

sphere, and the relatively high level of awareness of the right approaches and practices among decision-makers and management units in our country. This is not to say that chief (guest) editors, editorial boards and sponsoring institutions, and all other stakeholders in this endeavour, can afford to 'go with the flow' in today's constantly and rapidly changing business environment where whole industries are being disrupted, new obstacles and disruptions are emerging, business models are being refined (Williams, 2015; GMAC, 2013), and familiar predicaments revolve with new features whose solution often proves impossible through traditional management methods (Zlatev, 1999). The main challenges facing scientific journal publishing include those related to defining and assuming authorship responsibility, overwork and low motivation among reviewers, the phenomenon of "fake

reviewers", co-existing publishing models ranging from open access to "predatory publishing", imposed research (statistical) approaches, plagiarism, necessary regulations and proclamations (disclosures), including for unethical behavior, and last but not least, problems, resulting from the inevitable amendments, corrections and withdrawals of proposed papers for publication (Hausmann, Murphy, 2016; Ajami, Movahedi, 2013). In this publication, the research interest focuses on two specific challenges – securing a pool of appropriate reviewers and maintaining good relationships with potential authors.

1. ENSURING A POOL OF SUITABLE REVIEWERS

Ensuring a steady stream of suitable reviewers for incoming article proposals from a variety of authors, which, if approved, could be directed to publication in the relevant scientific journal, has traditionally represented a 'bottleneck' in the management of the publication process for each editorial board. Specific common (critical) situations in the search for potential reviewers and subsequent communication with them can be identified, namely:

- In the case of start-up journals, members of the editorial board deliberately seek out relatively prominent colleagues in certain fields of science in order to obtain their agreement to be included in the initial lists of referees for proposed articles in the first issues of the respective scientific journal.
- It is common practice to solicit people who intend to publish for potential reviewers – as early as when they register with the relevant electronic journal management platform. Of course, a possible refusal to publish the proposed work would certainly have an emotional impact on the author concerned, who is very likely not to accept an invitation to review another publication proposal addressed to him (her) at a later time. Furthermore, the groups of familiar colleagues in the scientific field for members of the editorial board and already published authors very quickly prove to be too narrow to satisfy the needs of a serious scientific journal that publishes at least four issues per year.
- Often, editors-in-chief require potential authors to recommend one or two prospective referees in the relevant scientific field when submitting their proposal for a scientific publication to the relevant electronic publishing management platform. Of course, the respective editors never openly state to the respective authors that the recommended colleagues will not be invited to review their potential publication, as there is a conflict of interest here. De facto, the editors thus expand their list of potential reviewers in the relevant scientific fields covered by the journal concerned.
- There are cases where editors-in-chief of scientific journals may exchange lists of suitable reviewers with each other.
- A widely used approach is doing a targeted search for specialists in different fields of science in the world's most popular databases of scientific literature, and especially in these that provide open access to indexed articles from other quality journals in the same field. In the latter case, the authors of the relevant articles constitute the target group for the respective editors-in-chief, members of editorial boards and associated administrative staff.

It is quite another question to what extent the selected specialists are the leading ones in the respective field, since in most cases the research is based on information filled in by third parties (other publishers) or by the authors themselves, the latter being interested in positioning themselves and their products in the best possible way to attract more readers and higher citation rates for the purpose of successful career development. Thus, editors-in-chief and members of editorial boards find themselves forced to undertake the laborious and time-consuming task of reviewing the publications of potential reviewers to assess in advance how well they would cope with their new role as evaluators of their colleagues' scholarly output.

Not to be overlooked is the usual position that a potential reviewer holds as a co-author on their publications – first author, second author, etc. Does the same person write more independently or in a team of researchers? What is the usual number of members in the respective scientific team that

produced a given article? The answers to the questions posed at these key points can be seen as indirect indicators of the degree of penetration into (knowledge and research of) a topic in a given scientific field by a potential reviewer.

Practical experience shows that quality in peer review is often ambiguously understood. On one hand, the same is a prerequisite for allowing only articles to be published that meet the current requirements for scientific creativity in the relevant scientific field, imposed by the world's leading research institutions and scientists. On the other hand, reviewers' ignorance or neglect of important factors determining the managerial, economic, social, political processes and the course of the research process in diverse local environments (e.g. lack of modern and reliable research software, underdevelopment of the "university – business organisations/associations" relationship, insufficient knowledge of new research methods, lack of familiarity with specific problems in the relevant field or region) may lead to the emergence of certain preferences and the accumulation of a number of trade-offs in setting specific research questions and carrying out the relevant studies underlying the potential publications, which would lead to the rejection of otherwise very useful prospective publications from the relevant region or vice versa - their excessive favoritism against the rest.

Last but not least, the potential effect of nepotism in the scientific sphere should also be noted, finding concrete realization in the peer review process, when any of the two parties involved (AN author and reviewer) makes an effort to violate to some extent the rules of double blind peer review of the respective publication proposal, recognizing an author's style and seeking contact with him to discuss the potential article. The latter discussion may prove useful to both author and reviewer, but in any case would leave the unpleasant taste of undeserved support received. And this is not necessary, since the Editor-in-Chief or Guest Editor later decides how much of the review content to select and make available to the author of the submitted publication proposal for reflection and to request grounded responses from the author to the comments and questions raised. It is for this reason that the worldwide practice of using at least two reviewers for each proposal of a scientific publication in a relevant journal has become necessary.

The postulates of the cultural management perspective (Schein, Schein, 2017; Nguyen-Phuong-Mai, 2019) dictate that overcoming the problem of securing a sufficient number of high-quality (excellent, outstanding) reviewers for incoming article proposals in the scientific fields, covered by the respective journal, requires considering and balancing the interests of the stakeholders in the process – the reviewers, editor-in-chief, (guest) editors and members of editorial boards, authors, governing bodies and administrators of electronic platforms for publishing, indexing and disseminating scientific content, each of whom performs relevant functions:

- the main added value in the observed interaction is generated by the reviewers, who produce the final product – the evaluation of the respective proposals for scientific publications. However, their work is usually not rewarded, unlike the contributions of the other stakeholders. It is commonly assumed and even inculcated in the scientific community that peer review is simply one of their unrewarded functions (a duty to society), indirectly providing them with a sense of belonging to the academic community.
- Chief (guest) editor and members of editorial boards – interested in the sustainable development of the respective scientific periodical, expressed in: (a) maintaining the high-quality of the scientific articles published in accordance with the modern requirements for the application of qualitative and quantitative methods in research and their appropriate ways of presentation to the target audience. (b) regularity in the publication of the respective issues of the journal with the appropriate number of articles at a predetermined subject matter. De facto, the representatives of this stakeholder group are the initiators of the evaluation process carried out on the relevant scientific products. Often the scientific journals are owned by well-known scientists and not by the universities or research institutes concerned. And many institutions chronically underfund this activity, relying primarily on the enthusiasm of colleagues 'dedicated' to maintaining the respective scientific periodical. But, as is well known, enthusiasm quickly wanes in the absence of adequate organisational support, in terms of not

only providing funding directly for the publishing process, but also for recruiting of the necessary staff, establishing and maintaining the necessary contacts, exchanging experiences, etc.

- The authors are eager to publish their scientific output, presenting the results of quantitative and qualitative studies, systematic reviews and analyses of similar research, and the creation of new concepts and theories in the relevant scientific fields. This strong desire in authors is also encouraged by the current requirements for employment in the scientific field introduced by the respective educational and scientific institutions where they contribute. The implemented systems to manage the performance of researchers should aim at establishing a healthy balance between quality in science (recognition: citations, invitations to speak as a guest at leading international scientific events, inclusion on relevant committees, juries and panels within other educational institutions, the civil service or at the level of quasi-governmental organisations - for example, the European Union) and productivity (number of publications per year or other appraisal period).

In fact, securing a peer review for a potential scientific publication in a relevant journal can be considered as a project and therefore its management is logically subject to the principles of project management (Nguyen, Mohamed, Panuwatwanich, 2018; Missonier, Loufrani-Fedida, 2014; Jepsen, Eskerod, 2009). Furthermore, there is a total lack of consensus among the researchers themselves on the appropriate way of perceiving and respecting this highly skilled work, as the range of their de/motivation (Blašková, Tumová, Blaško, Majchrzak-Lepczyk, 2021; Angelova, 2018) in relation to the performance of this task turns out to be too widely open, as revealed by the submitted answers to a research question by Yousif (2020) in the ResearchGate academic community, namely:

- defining peer review as a voluntary provision of a free service to the scientific community and its acceptance as a duty (vocation) for every researcher.
- the opportunity for the researcher, in his role as a reviewer, to become thoroughly acquainted with the work of colleagues, to update his knowledge, to improve his skills in writing scientific output, to accumulate and transmit specific research experience.
- invitation to review a proposal for an article in a journal is perceived as a public recognition of the merits of a researcher in a specific scientific field by his/her colleagues.
- joining the team of reviewers of a scientific journal is defined as an opportunity for in-depth discussion of some interesting scientific issues between the reviewer and the authors, and I would add with the mediation of the editor-in-chief (guest editor).
- assessment and recommendations for refinement of potential scientific publications embodies pleasure for the reviewer.
- demonstrating open disapproval of commissioning/accepting to perform for free, complex work task by high-qualified reviewers, given that publishing companies generate profits. A demand is made for financial remuneration.
- recognizing the need of compensating this highly skilled work through other extrinsic rewards that can be offered by various stakeholder groups, such as a certificate of recognition for peer review, providing reviewers with a subscription to a relevant paid journal for a specified period in their preferred format (digital or paper), including peer review of scholarly publications as a quantitative indicator in the appraisal system of relevant scientists and lecturers with appropriate weighting for the performed work task.

In fact, it is clear by now that a more comprehensive and in-depth analysis of stakeholder groups needs to be carried out on the basis of which corrective actions can be taken. It is not only a question of identifying the stakeholder groups, their required contributions, their interests, but also of anticipating expectations for securing satisfactory external and internal rewards for the outputs produced by the reviewers, assessing their demonstrated commitment, the power of influence they possess over the other project participants (AN publishing a high-quality research product in a scientific journal), choosing specific strategic moves and tactics to appropriately impact each stakeholder group when deemed necessary (Jepsen, Eskerod, 2009; Cabanis-Brewin, 2007).

So far, solutions to the problem of building and maintaining a sufficient pool of candidates for reviewing proposals for scientific articles by authors have been proposed and implemented only at the organizational level (i.e., the editorial board and adjunct staff of a particular scientific journal), which is at the root of the unsatisfactory and unsustainable results achieved by the corrective actions undertaken. Clearly, it is now time to look at the problem differently by identifying and segmenting the overall target audience confronted with this large and revolving problem in a given geographic region and across national boundaries (AN all economic universities and other universities with business faculties in Bulgaria, and in the other member states of the European Union) in order to seek for innovative, unique and ambitious decisions, contributing to the formulation of a radical solution to a difficult problem through the creative use of new technologies, establishing a desirable culture at organisational, sectoral, national and international levels and introducing social innovations (Ismail, Malone, van Geest, Diamandis, 2014; Diamandis, Kotler, 2012). Clearly, this is about applying the principles of exponential thinking, oriented towards deep and huge change, high value creation and unprecedented growth – tenfold or more than the current level (Bonchek, 2016; Ismail, Malone, van Geest, Diamandis, 2014). And more specifically, it means taking specific initiatives, such as:

- 1) Conclusion of agreements between universities and research institutes – even with the mediation of the state, to approximate certain attributes in their human resource management systems, and in particular in the module for the evaluation of the work performance of lecturers and researchers, where the range of the minimum and maximum workload of reviewers for a given evaluation period and their commitment both to their employer and to another educational institution that is a party to the agreement should be regulated. This is also about negotiating the exchange and protection of professional information in this sub-area. This will specify how many and what kind of peer review projects a lecturer and researcher can undertake within and outside their institution. Thus, over-involving of certain colleagues in this activity may be avoided, either because they are considered excellent specialists or because they are characterized as extremely compliant.
- 2) Using data from the organisational electronic workload reporting modules for lecturers and scientists in academic institutions (if available, but if not, should be shared) and the Register of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (NACID, 2022) as input for a purpose-built scientific peer review platform, where it should be explicitly defined which specialist (identity) in which areas of science can undertake peer review. Provide access to this platform to the chief (guest) editors, members of editorial boards, adjunct staff, the authors themselves and other interested parties through a service registration. It would probably be best if this platform were integrated with the already established national repository of scientific output – the so-called Bulgarian Portal for Open Science (BPOS, 2022) where reviewers' contributions may be made visible as counts by years.
- 3) In a further stage, the national repositories of all EU member states could be integrated by introducing additional language competency requirements for lecturers and scientists, allowing them to produce and peer review scientific output in the respective languages of the EU countries (or publishers, journals). Certain private electronic platforms for managing the publishing of scientific journals may also be joined under certain conditions, ensuring more open access and balancing the interests of all stakeholders. And extending the territorial reach of such an electronic platform beyond the European Union could be done along the lines of the Erasmus+ programme.

2. MAINTAINING GOOD RELATIONS WITH POTENTIAL AUTHORS ESPECIALLY IN THE INEVITABLE CORRECTIONS, REVISIONS AND WITHDRAWALS (REJECTIONS) OF PROPOSED PAPERS FOR PUBLICATION

Potential authors in a scientific journal can very often also accept the role of reviewers for publications by other lecturers and scientists at a later date. Maintaining good relations with people

seeking the journal as a communication channel for their research results is therefore a must, given that in some cases harsh refusals to publish scientific output could be challenged in court. Therefore, it is always necessary to communicate clearly and openly with potential authors, outlining the main reasons for refusing to take the publication to the next stage in the publication process (AN before peer review and at the editor's discretion; after receipt of peer review; after the editor's review of the author's responses to reviewers' comments). It is imperative in such situations to point out certain merits of the proposed scholarly output, to highlight the presence of specific deviations from the journal's publication criteria (e.g., the journal's thematic scope, problem formulation, theoretical advances, selection of appropriate methodology, and the presence of significant consequences for business and/or government policy, etc.), and to invite the author to review them more thoroughly at a future time when he or she decides to direct his or her output to the same scholarly journal again. Any potential author should not feel insulted by a refusal to publish, but simply be politely and specifically informed that they have not achieved the minimum level of quality for scholarly output required by the editorial board of the journal concerned. Furthermore, the individual should be encouraged to try again with a new, potentially better scientific product.

Providing an environment for effective communication among the members within each stakeholder group, and among diverse constituencies (Schein, E., Schein, P., 2017; ***, 2015), suggests that it would be useful to establish an association of academic journal publishers where a formal code of ethics, guidelines (rules) for the use of research standards (approaches and methods) across scientific fields, and other necessary rules for effective communication and dialogue between stakeholder groups can be developed so that they can publicly express and defend their interests, negotiate, and reach consensus in addressing pressing issues now and in the future.

CONCLUSION

This paper analyzes two acute problems in the publishing process of scholarly output in academic journals in our country, such as securing a pool of suitable reviewers and maintaining good relationships with potential authors. Solutions are proposed, relying on improving the balance of stakeholders' interests in the process, using the Internet and other digital technologies, addressing and solving problems beyond the organizational level – at regional, national and international levels, which requires transposing and aggregating members' interests within each stakeholder group and finding consensus among them.

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