



**Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions
Innovative Training Networks (ITN)
European Joint Doctorate (EJD)**



**Editors' perspectives on communication
practices within the manuscript review
process in biomedical journals:
a qualitative study**

**Keti Glonti
08.03.18, PEERE**



This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 676207.

Background

- No effective interventions*
- Inherently human, social and subjective dimensions

*‘Although I agree with your commentary, my overall feeling is that you are **attacking the paper and by extension the journal**. I would be very careful to avoid generating this feeling among the editors.’*

*Bruce, R., Chauvin, A., Trinquart, L., Ravaud, P. and Boutron, I., 2016. Impact of interventions to improve the quality of peer review of biomedical journals: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *BMC medicine*, 14(1), p.85.

Aim

The aim of this study is to disentangle current communication practices within the manuscript review process of biomedical journals.

The specific objectives are:

- To outline the roles and tasks of actors involved in the peer review process with focus on peer reviewers

→ From the journal editors' point of view

Why look into Roles & Tasks?

- Journal editors and peer reviewers operate largely without formal training

[BMC Med.](#) 2016 Feb 2;14:16. doi: 10.1186/s12916-016-0561-2.

A scoping review of competencies for scientific editors of biomedical journals.

[Galipeau J](#)¹, [Barbour V](#)², [Baskin P](#)³, [Bell-Syer S](#)⁴, [Cobey K](#)⁵, [Cumpston M](#)⁶, [Deeks J](#)⁷, [Garner P](#)⁸, [MacLehose H](#)⁹, [Shamseer L](#)⁵, [Straus S](#)¹⁰, [Tuqwell P](#)^{5,11}, [Wager E](#)¹², [Winker M](#)¹³, [Moher D](#)^{5,12}.

- Expected roles and tasks of key actors unclear

The most **important tasks** for **peer reviewers evaluating a randomized controlled trial** are not **congruent** with the **tasks** most often **requested** by **journal editors**.

Chauvin A, Ravaud P, Baron G, Barnes C, Boutron I.

[BMC Med.](#) 2015 Jul 3;13:158. doi: 10.1186/s12916-015-0395-3.

PMID: 26141137 [Free PMC Article](#)

Methods

Qualitative study design

- Semi-structured interviews
- Topic guide based on scoping review
- Refined through 4 pilot interviews

Open Access

Protocol

BMJ Open A scoping review protocol on the roles and tasks of peer reviewers in the manuscript review process in biomedical journals

Ketevan Glonti,^{1,2,3} Daniel Cauchi,⁴ Erik Cobo,⁵ Isabelle Boutron,^{2,3} David Moher,⁶
Darko Hren¹

Inclusion criteria & recruitment

Maximum variation purposive sampling to recruit a heterogeneous study sample of journal editors:

- Involved in the communication process between authors and peer reviewers
- Who contribute to the determination of journal content & policy

Recruitment

- Existing professional networks
- Two research publishers (BMC, part of Springer Nature) BMJ Publishing Group)
- Eighth International Congress on Peer Review and Scientific Publication

Analysis

- Interviews analysed using **thematic analysis** by Braun and Clarke*
- Saturation addressed through codebook development & application:
 - 1) Inductive coding** of 6 semi-structured interviews by two independent researchers
 - Establishment of a preliminary codebook
 - 2) Codebook application** to remaining interviews
 - Refinement of the codebook and establishment of the point of saturation.

*Braun, V. and Clarke, V., 2006. Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology*, 3(2), pp.77-101.

Results

Demographic characteristics

Gender	Female (n=16), Male (n=40),
Position	Junior Editor (n= 1), Senior/Associate Editor (n=11), Co-Editor-in-Chief (n=4), Editor-in-Chief (n=39), Editorial Director (n=1)
Commitment	Part-time (n=50), Full-time (n=6)
Geographic location	Argentina (n=1), Australia (n=3), Bosnia and Herzogovina (n=1), Canada (n=3), Chile (n=1), Colombia (n=1), Croatia (n=1), Finland (n=1), France (n=2), Germany (n=2), Iran (n=1), Italy (n=2), Malawi (n=1), Malta (n=1), Mexico (n=1), New Zealand (n=1), Norway (n=3), Philippines (n=1), Spain (n=2), UK (n=13), USA (n=14)

Journal characteristics

Journal specialty	Basic science (n=2), General medicine (n=11), Specialty (n=41), Mega journal (n=2)
Impact factor	Impact factor (n=27), No impact factor (n=29),
Peer review model	Single-blind (n= 40), Double-blind (n=5), Triple-blind (n=1), Open peer review (n=9), Post-publication (n=1)
Financial set-up	Open access (n=35), Subscription (n=4), Mixed (n=17)
Publishers	Academic (n=9), Commercial (n=44), Mixed (n=13)

Themes



Being a peer reviewer

Roles & Tasks

- **Manuscript assessment** – fairly standard
- **Advisor to the editor**

'We regard reviewers very much as advisors. We are the decision makers, the reviewers are our advisors and many reviewers come up with sentences like I don't think this paper is good enough for your journal and this is what I completely discard. It is a temptation that reviewers have. You know they think they are just the decision makers'

*'We ask reviewers to tick something like, say accept after revision, revise or review or reject but we don't always follow that recommendation it is **just interesting for us to see what they would recommend if they were in that decision making position.**'*

Being a peer reviewer

- **Reader**

'Reviewers are the best readers of a journal, and if the reviewers didn't understand what the authors did then the paper didn't go to the right journal. Even if we feel that the reviewers are not completely right, we have to keep in mind that what the reviewers understood is similar to the things that the future readers of the journal will understand so we have to follow their advice very closely.'

*'...the reviewer **not necessarily is a potential reader** of the paper. Just someone who is honestly professionally, expert and is in the field and can understand the paper, and spot weaknesses and merits but not necessarily.'*

Being an editor

Roles & Tasks

- **Managing peer review**

- Recruitment: Informal strategies

*'You know, there is also **a bias** because the journal editorial team are people from big hospitals so there is a bias because **if we don't find a proper reviewer we use our own colleagues** 'Hey mate would you mind reviewing this paper?'*

*'at the end I have to pick up the phone and say 'John, I know it is a very bad period there are resignations, your wife just delivered a baby, and you are very busy but please, please, please, please, please review this paper. And he would reply **'But this is not really my field'**. Yes, but you know it! Sometimes it works just like this.'*

Being an editor

Expectations towards peer reviewers

→ Non standard review

'I want the great picture about the relevance of the paper.'

'I want their subjective feeling as an expert about the paper'

In contrast to how expectations are communicated?

'They get standard guidelines'

Quality

Performance tracking

- *'We have to rank peer reviewers, we have to give them a grade. **It's an internal score. It's numerical from 0 to 100 and I am just putting round numbers 70 or 80 or 90 or 95 but not 83. Never.'***
- *'It's a rating scale from 1-5'.*
- *'**Just the feeling of the editor.'***
- *'This is not a compulsory field for editors and I think most of the editors don't fill it in.'*

Quality

- **Feedback to peer reviewers**

'For us it is easier to choose a better reviewer than to try to improve a bad one.'

'There is no time for this.'

Discussion points

- Provision of standard guidelines but expect non-standard reviews. Expectations beyond the form
 - Room to improve? Sharing example of good peer review?
- Some editors do not know their submission system
 - Communication
- Informal recruitment strategy
 - Introduction of 'bias'? Decrease in quality?
- Advisor?
- Quality of peer reviewer reports not assessed
- No feedback for performance provided
- ...

**Thank you!
Questions?**

kglonti@unist.hr



www.mirror-ejd.eu



[@Keti_2012](https://twitter.com/Keti_2012)

[@MirrorProject](https://twitter.com/MirrorProject)

This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 676207