What is the Role of Editors in the Publication Process?

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ABSTRACT

I discuss issues arising from “How to Write an Effective Referee Report and Improve the Scientific Review Process” by Berk, Harvey, and Hirshleifer (Journal of Economic Perspectives 31, 2017, 231–244). I argue that an unduly strong focus on referees can leave the role of editors in the publication process under-explored. I assert that we should learn more about editorial behavior to ensure author resources are better directed to the appropriate outlets and submission fee wastage is minimized.

INTRODUCTION

In “How to Write an Effective Referee Report and Improve the Scientific Review Process” Berk, Harvey and Hirshleifer (BHH) (2017) present an occasionally useful treatise on how referees can write more effective reports. I wrote a paper called “The Scholarly Review Process in Finance: Some Rants and Some Suggestions for Improvement” (Subrahmanyam, 2015) that I sent to Harvey and Hirshleifer several months ago. That paper focused on general processes used in screening papers. In this paper I respond to BHH by specifically focusing on the role of editors, rather than referees.

It cannot be denied that the role of the referee is critical in the scholarly process. However, it is also the case that a referee is not chosen exogenously. The referee is selected by an editor, after the editor has learned the identity of the authors, and perused the paper. Although there can be little doubt that editorial talent is material to making sure good scholarship gets its due, I argue that we understand little about how editors actually function, and neither are editors willing to disclose much about how they approach editing. Authors have to find out the hard way what editorial philosophy and strategy are after paying multiple submission fees.

Part of the reason editors are not questioned is that they are public faces of journals, and it is very uncomfortable to take on public figures. It is far easier, on the other hand, to view referees as an anonymous, amorphous body, and thus critique the entire body. A second issue is that editors obviously have a lot of power to influence careers, so many authors may be reluctant to push for more transparency on editorial functioning.

In my experience, quite a few editors are kind, just, fair, and totally committed to vetting the best scholarship. Nonetheless, perhaps subconsciously, editors are subject to biases like any other human, and the Pandora’s Box of editing should be opened for further transparency.

A PARADIGM FOR EDITORIAL BEHAVIOR

I propose that agents seek power and status (viz. Magee and Galinsky, 2008). Power emanates from an agent becoming an editor and controlling career outcomes. Status, once one becomes an editor, emanates from three sources (i) Maintaining a perception that the journal they edit remains a good journal (ii) seeking to ensure that their standing in the eyes of scholars that matter remains high, and (iii) their
social connections with important authors remain unaffected. First and foremost, of course, editors seek to be just and fair and publish the best papers, as that helps them maintain status. However, the three sources mentioned above also create “distortions”. Thus, I propose that the first desire creates a rationale for creating “busy work” to make sure authors value the publication. This is based on Labroo and Kim (2009), who argue that a goal is valued more by agents if they have to work harder towards the goal, independent of the value of the goal or achievement itself. The second and third desires require them to cut slack to famous and well-connected authors. This is for two reasons. First, an editor who rejects the work of famous authors automatically loses reputational capital because the famous author will likely blame the editor than himself (self-attribution bias-viz. Bem, 1965). Second, alienating famous authors destroys social relations between powerful scholars and editors, which can reduce status (Lin, 1999). The endowment of power also creates a tendency to “social engineer” i.e., to influence the process to produce an outcome the editor considers desirable for society and paper submitters. The overall outcomes we see emanate from a convex combination of all of the issues delineated above. Of course, the weights used by different editors on the various components are different. This makes it all the more important to understand how a particular editor is going to edit.

QUESTIONS FOR EDITORS

When we submit a paper, we know the choice of referees is critical in the eventual outcome of the paper, and, in turn in critical career outcomes such as tenure. However, we understand very little as to how exactly editors assign referees to papers. Based on my experiences and those of others who have generously provided anecdotes, here are some questions that could potentially be posed to editors, divided into three topics. While the questions are relevant, I leave it for authors to figure out what would happen if I in fact sent out these questionnaires to editors! I wager that I would probably receive non-committal, politically astute responses, or no responses, from most.

General Questions on Referee Choices

- Does the institution of the author influence the choice of the referee? If so, how?
- Does the seniority of the author influence the choice of the referee? If so, how?
- Does the seniority of the author influence how many referees are chosen?
- Do editors with a preconceived notion on a paper sequentially look for referees until a favorable/unfavorable referee is found?
- If a paper is critical of a certain line of work, is it reasonable to expect that the paper will not be sent to the referee who has worked in that line, or should authors request this explicitly?
- Certain referees are prompt, certain others slow. Do editors use slow referees punitively for certain authors? Fast referees to reward other authors?
- Have editors experienced that certain referees are prejudiced against certain types of authors (based on affiliation, ethnicity, etc.)? If so, what types of prejudice exist? Can authors be assured that such prejudiced referees won’t be used against them?
- When an author submits a paper, do editors consult with other scholars or editors non-anonymously over and beyond the referee? If so, in what circumstances? Do they inform the authors when they do? Is this practice just and fair?
- Do editors tend to burden authors (especially junior ones) with referees who create a lot of busy work so that authors will value the publication?
• A referee who has recently had his/her work rejected from the journal is, ceteris paribus, more likely to reject submissions assigned to him/her. This happens because the referee may not be in a mood or a frame of mind to view the journal, or the submitted papers to the journal, sympathetically (e.g., Bolger et al., 1989). The reverse is true for referees with accepted papers, as they would tend to go gentle. Do editors take this into account when assigning referees to papers?

Social Engineering
• If an author has had a couple of papers accepted in the journal recently, do editors send the next submission to an extra tough referee to slow the author down? Is this just and fair?
• If the paper is judged to be preliminary or rough by the editor, do editors deliberately slow the decision process down to “teach the author a lesson?” Is this just and fair?
• If the author is in the editor’s social network, do editors tend to send the paper to another person in that same network or do they consciously avoid doing so? Does whether they indulge in this practice depend on their first impression of the paper? Is this just and fair?

Line of work
• What is the editorial philosophy? Is the editor biased against certain lines of work (e.g., experimental)? Biased in favor of other lines of work?
• Does the editor appreciate theory?
• Does the editor appreciate reduced form empirical work without theory?
• Does the editor appreciate structural approaches?
• Does the editor appreciate behavioral approaches?

As can be seen from the preceding questions, the editor has a virtually unlimited number of ways to influence the publication outcome. Given this, I now provide some instances of editorial behavior from my own career and those of others, and then some prescriptions on how editors should conduct themselves to be just and fair arbiters.

ANECDOTAL INSTANCES OF EDITORIAL INTERACTIONS WITH AUTHORS AND PROPOSED IMPROVEMENTS

I provide below actual events that occurred or perceptions that were felt in actual editorial interactions. Not all of these involve me; some are second hand accounts.

A finance journal had three editors, and I felt one was biased against me, so I never requested him. Later I found that editors’ practices were to consult each of the other editors before proceeding on a paper so my choice didn’t matter. As an author I felt that the process should have been made transparent to me.

Yes. If editors are adopting a certain process, they should publicize the process to ensure that authors have full information before they make a decision.

A finance journal provided a revise and resubmit on a paper, and then received another paper on the same topic to which it also gave an R&R without informing the first author. The first author received a second round rejection on the grounds that the later-submitted paper dominated his. I felt that the first author should have been immediately informed that the competing paper had received an R&R and was better (or that he was competing against that first paper) so he could have speedily taken his paper to another journal or speeded up the revision.
Yes. If editors give an R&R on a competing paper after the first one gets an R&R, the first author should be informed immediately.

_A finance journal once gave a revise and resubmit on a paper, but later switched referees when the original paper was resubmitted. The new referee had a completely different list of concerns._

Referees should never be switched just to give authors a hard time or for any reason, unless the original referee becomes indisposed or declines, or is unduly late. Authors are bound not to submit their papers to another journal while they are under review. Editors are bound to stick to their referee choices throughout the process.

_A finance journal once had an editor who rejected all papers in a line of work (e.g., experimental), on the grounds that he did not like experiments._

If editors don’t like a certain line of work, they should make position statements on their stances before they take office. Making authors waste scarce resources to find out a broad brush editorial opinion is not right.

_A finance journal once had an editor whose practice on certain papers was to sequentially keep looking for referees until a favorable one was found. There are also cases where one favorable report led an editor to look for another referee with a contrary opinion, to reject a paper._

Pick one or two thoughtful referees and stick with them, unless the report is dreadful (in this case inform the author that a second opinion is being solicited). Overall, feel free to overrule them, but don’t do sequential picking to fit an agenda.

_As an author, I used to coauthor with famous people. I got extremely sympathetic responses to my papers and my disputes. Then, I stopped coauthoring with these famous people. Almost immediately, I started getting hit with unsympathetic editors and abusive referees._

While there is an obvious element of endogeneity here, it still raises the issue of whether it is OK to use famous referees for famous authors and vice versa. I would say no. Famous authors acting as referees may tend to be more secure and easy-going. Not-so-famous authors acting as referees are somewhat insecure. This matters for outcomes.

_Once, at a finance journal, a Reject and Resubmit was issued, with three reports. One review was asking the authors to do a specific thing, but the editor said it was probably OK to ignore that comment. When the authors resubmitted the paper while ignoring this point, the paper went back to the same referee who authored that report. Predictably, the referee recommended rejection._

Editors should take care to be time consistent and back up their editorial letters. If they have instructed the authors to prepare a revision while stating that some points are not critical, the authors should not be penalized for not addressing those points.

_A commonly heard view about the Quarterly Journal of Economics is that it favors people from Cambridge, Massachusetts, and the University of Chicago (PhDs and/or faculty from these institutions) in issuing revise and resubmit decisions. Other authors have an uphill battle._

A bias in favor of certain institutions in providing opportunities to revise is reprehensible. Perhaps even more contemptible is a bias against certain institutions. Editors should treat papers on merits.

_An editor accepted a survey paper on portfolio choice by an author from a famous university. When another paper on a different aspect of portfolio choice using actual data was submitted, it was desk rejected._

Clearly the two decisions are internally inconsistent. Desk rejects should be used sparingly.

_An economics journal gave a revise and resubmit on a paper. By the time the authors revised and resubmitted, the editor’s term expired. The new editor stated that the revision wasn’t good enough and the paper was rejected._
The new editor should honor revise and resubmit decisions made by the old editor, whether they agree. In any case, wasting the authors’ time till the paper is revised and submitted and then providing a different editorial view is unacceptable.

An accounting journal does not refund submission fees when papers are desk rejected without being sent to referees. These fees are as high as $500. Once an author submitted a paper (related to a previous published paper in the same journal) it was desk rejected not because the paper was low quality but because it was a better fit for finance journals. The editor admitted this was his bias, and some other editor (e.g., that person who handled the other paper) might have come to a different conclusion. The journal kept half the submission fee.

If desk rejections are a matter of opinion and an editorial lottery, authors should not be forced to part with money in a manner akin to a Vegas slot machine. The correct thing would have been to refund the entire fee.

Once, when a journal issued a rejection, and the author heatedly protested, the editor asked why the author hadn’t copied the coauthors as it “affected them” too. The reference seemed to be that heated protests will cause harsh treatment on future papers.

Vindictive behavior is heinous, and receiving unhappy communication from unhappy authors is part of the editor’s job. If the editor feels he or she cannot treat all scientific papers on merits and respect the author’s confidential right to protest, they should immediately resign.

Once, an author disputed an editorial decision with a new dispute processing fee. The second decision following the dispute was also a rejection, but for reasons largely unrelated to the author’s dispute. The second decision relied little on the detailed dispute arguments carefully constructed by the authors.

This is unfair to the authors. Editors should not get to make up new arguments to reject papers once the dispute process has begun. The resolution of the dispute has to be based on the original arguments the author received unless an outright mistake is discovered.

As a referee, I felt I got disproportionate numbers of papers by authors of a certain ethnicity. I had a nagging suspicion that editors were sending them to me because they knew I would give that ethnicity a fair shake.

This tacitly assumes that editors only trust people of a certain background to review papers of authors with that background. If editors feel this way, they should be transparent about this with the community.

I cannot prove this, but I have a strong suspicion that a paper that said anomalies in stock markets were spurious was sent to a referee who was involved in a hedge fund that traded on anomalies. I felt this was really wrong.

Agreed. This event, if it happened, is a serious conflict of interest situation, and should never happen. Editors should take care to ensure that chosen referees do not have a financial conflict with the paper they are given to referee.

An economics journal is known to issue revise and resubmits with as many as four referee reports. Once one gets past the most important comments, the rest is busy work. I felt four reports were an excessive burden on authors. Sometimes, on the other hand, the number of referees at the same journal goes down to as low as unity.

Is it really necessary to burden authors with four reports? Will these make the paper more publishable than otherwise? I would argue that if this many referees are needed to make the paper publishable the paper should probably be rejected. Editors should understand that authors’ time is scarce. The perception this type of editorial behavior creates is that editors are creating busy work to make authors value the publication.
As an author, I get frustrated when referees come back saying “interesting, but needs a lot of work,” and I get a rejection. More famous and/or connected authors get the same reaction, but get a revise and resubmit instead.

The dividing line between R&R and reject should be clearly specified in advance. Moving the goalpost for less connected and less famous authors is wrong.

As an author, I often felt a practice akin to a caste system was followed. A. Scholars highest on the totem pole (at elite institutions), B. Just short of great, C. Good, D. OK, E. Unheard of. The system worked as follows. A paper by A would hardly ever go to B; almost always to another A. Since As generally are secure in their success, this ensured that papers by A had a leg up in the process. Papers by B scholars could go to A, with possible corresponding harsh treatment. But it seldom ever went the other way: B scholars didn’t usually get to referee A papers but only got to referee B or C papers. E’s typically got desk rejected or cursorily rejected by D’s or Cs. Whereas D’s or C’s generally struggled as their papers could go to either A or B referees, who tended to be harsh on people below them.

The above type of practice is reprehensible. The paper should be sent to the most appropriate referee in each case without regard to institutional affiliation or status.

SUGGESTIONS FOR EDITORS

After the specific anecdotes, let me now provide some general suggestions. These may seem to be cast in an abrasive “lecturing” style but why, if the JEP can publish an article lecturing referees, can an author not “lecture” the editors?

• Editors should make public statements on their approach to editing and their topic biases when they begin terms.
• Editors should communicate all information to authors as the review process evolves. For example, if the editor requests a second opinion after the first one is in, the author should be informed when the second opinion is solicited.
• Editors should match papers to referees in a thoughtful, unbiased, way. Since authors are paying the submission fees, the benefit should go to the authors in the matching process. I feel the Journal of Financial Economics is the best at this.
• Editors should not perform social engineering such as imposing quotas for some authors; this should be left for society (to discount or reward rapid production). The sole aim should be to publish interesting and well-done papers.
• Editors should render decisions on papers as promptly as possible. No strategically sending papers to slow referees to slow the process down, and no putting junior authors through the “wringer” to make them value the publication.
• Editors should not micromanage revises by littering the paper all over with comments and conducting power plays by, for example, making authors do frivolous things like delete the “table of contents” at the end of the introduction. Comments should be parsimonious and restricted to major issues.
• If editors feel that authors are being treated unduly harshly or unfairly by a referee, they should immediately overrule the referee.
• Editors should not accept rejection recommendations that are overly broad-brush and shallow, whether they emanated from a famous referee. All referees should be held to similar quality standards.
• Editors should resolve disputes fairly, and focus only on the original referees and the arguments made by the author. New arguments should be impermissible, unless they demonstrate a mistake in the paper.
• Finally, I understand that the tendency to want to “engineer a desired outcome” via an appropriate choice of referee(s) is inevitable given the endowment of power that editors have. I propose that such engineering should always focus on giving the authors the best shot unless there is clear evidence the author is loose or sloppy or the paper is just rank bad. The process should seldom involve engineering that rigs the outcome against the author. This is because, as I have said before, it is the authors that provide the creative impetus that allows journals to exist, and authors that are paying the fees.

CONCLUSION

Most of us can provide examples of at least one kind and just editor, who intervened to ensure our paper got its due. We are, in general, grateful to editors and referees who helped us become successful. Accordingly, I argue that if we come together as authors, referees, and editors, without scapegoating one party or another, we can achieve better outcomes. All of us are to blame for dysfunctional processes. Let’s improve our profession for the better.

REFERENCES