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Editorial Note:

Fast Peer Review: A Practice of Predatory Journals or Fair Treatment for Authors?

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Abstract

Despite its weaknesses, peer review is our best gatekeeper of rigorous science. With the advent of on-line and open-access publishing, a vigorous debate has ensued over the timeliness of peer review. Many of us remember, and some still face, long peer review and publishing timeframes. Ware and Mabe (2015) estimated that a reviewer needs from several hours to a day to carefully prepare a peer review. Even so, the time from submission to first decision varies from 8 weeks to 18 weeks and varies by academic discipline and journal. Although the slowness of the peer review process has been critiqued (Lotriet, 2012), long ingrained processes have been slow to change. The development of the open access publishing has brought to the forefront the need to speed the peer review process and reduce the time to publication. However, short peer review times have been cited as one of the hallmarks of

predatory journals (Cobey et al. 2018). Some have suggested that a faster and more agile peer review process may undermine the quality of published research (Bagdasarian et al. 2020).

Keywords: Academic journals, academic publishing, predatory journals, peer-review

Introduction

The landscape of both peer review and the publication process is changing. Importantly, both procedures are being accelerated. Recognition is growing that efficient and streamlined procedures can confer speed and fairness without comprising quality of the peer review process. Many of the major publishers are trying to complete the peer review process in shorter timeframes.

Springer Nature, one of the largest publishers, states on its website that they are committed to rapid editorial assessment and publication, but still suggests a timeframe of 3 to 6 months from submission to publication.¹

Elsevier states that every year it tries to improve the speed of its publication process. At one of their journals, it takes an average of 1,55 weeks (about 11 days) from submission to first decision.²

MDPI, one of the largest open access publishers, displays a rapid peer review (first decision) and publication time on its journal websites. For example, "Sustainability" - one of MDPI's journals with high metrics, announced a rapid peer review completion (from submission to first decision) in 15,4 days and 3,9 days from acceptance to online publication.³

IEEE access, another publisher, announced rapid peer review from 4 to 6 weeks for a decision and the same time length for publication.⁴ Taylor & Francis offers an "accelerated publication" option in its service list. In some of its journals, for 7.000 Euros per article, authors can order accelerated publication with a conditional 1-2 week peer review procedure and online publication in 1-2 weeks after-acceptance.⁵ PLOS One, the second largest open access journal in the world, states its awareness of the importance of the prompt editorial assessment and publication of the submitted papers. Its

¹ <https://support.springernature.com/en/support/solutions/articles/6000131708-timescale-to-publish-an-article-for-a-springer-journal> (Accessed 23 August 2021).

² <https://www.elsevier.com/physical-sciences-and-engineering/materials-science/journals/fast-publication> (Accessed 21 August 2021).

³ <https://www.mdpi.com/journal/sustainability> (Accessed 17 August 2021).

⁴ <https://ieeaccess.ieee.org/about-ieee-access/rapid-peer-review/> (Accessed 17 August, 2021).

⁵ <https://taylorandfrancis.com/partnership/commercial/accelerated-publication/> (Accessed 17 August 2021).

statistics for the period January 2019 to December 2020 is 45 days to first decision.⁶

Frontiers, an open access publisher, under its program "collaborative peer review" provides rigorous, constructive, and transparent peer review within 90 days on average from submission to final decision.⁷

Even though this trend started before the current pandemic, the Coronavirus accelerated the the shift to timely peer review and publication (Shopovski and Sloboda, 2020). Some medical journals have reduced their publication times by over 80% (Horbach, 2020). During these difficult times, speed has become a necessity and the feasibility of an agile peer review has been confirmed. Major publishers are moving out of their comfort zones and beginning to provide academics something that they should have given them a long time ago – a more agile peer review and publication process.

The contributions of the reviewers and editors to agile peer review and publishing is undisputed. Reviewers provide rigorous and timely review reports; Editors provide a rapid initial screening of the submitted papers and continuing communication with the reviewers regarding their availability to complete reviews. Authors are integral to an agile peer review and publishing. Authors can facilitate agile review by understanding the mission and scope of the journal, adhering the submission templates and guidelines, and by submitting papers that have been written, re-written, and corrected with care. Authors need to respond to requested revisions promptly.

Bringing agility to academic publishing should be a positive change for publishers, editors, authors, and reviewers alike. Publishers and editors have a dual responsibility to ensure that peer review is agile and still rigorous. We also believe that publishers who promise agile review and publication should be held to account. Data is needed as to promised and actual publication timeframes..

Conflict of interest:

Dr. Jovan Shopovski is Managing Editor, Dr. Robert W. McGee is Editor-in-Chief, and Dr. Daniel B. Hier is an Editor in Chief of the European Scientific Journal, ESJ. Since its founding in 2010, ESJ has championed an agile peer review process that is respectful of the time of authors and reviewers alike.

⁶ <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/s/journal-information#loc-timely-publication> (Accessed 17 August 2021).

⁷ <https://www.frontiersin.org/about/review-system> (Accessed 17 August 2021).

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