Editorial: The "publish and perish" phenomenon: how journals can be affected by it and survive

"Adapt or perish, now as ever, is nature's inexorable imperative."

H.G. Wells, British writer (1866-1946)

A worldwide phenomenon, the so-called "publish or perish" dilemma has been tormenting (without any exaggeration) academics for decades, with its origins dating back to the 1950s and 1960s (de Rond & Miller, 2005). This conundrum is intimately related to academics' career development, employment maintenance and publication rewards (Byrne & Christopher, 2020); hence, the "survival" element, particularly to the group known as *early career academics* or *junior faculty* (Vossen, 2017; Aprile, Ellem, & Lole, 2020).

Literature has pointed out that this problem has several unintended consequences, mostly negative, which we present as follows. Firstly, maybe the best-known outcome is the emphasis on productivity or quantity of articles rather than on their quality. Sometimes known as "academic productivism" (Teixeira, Marqueze, & Moreno, 2020) and "salami science" practice (Pfleegor, Katz, & Bowers, 2019), this tendency focuses on publishing as many papers as possible, often at the expense of the quality and rigour naturally expected. In some cases, authors "slice" their research into very specific results and publish each separately instead of one impactful paper with more profound implications. This subject is so relevant that it has drawn the attention of the general media (e.g. El País, 2023; Bouter, 2024).

The second outcome, closely related to the first, is the rise of ethical issues in publications (Pfleegor et al., 2019; Warsy & Warsy, 2019). The number of problems related to the (lack of) ethics in academic publishing is vast. It encompasses the lack of criteria for paper authorship, redundant publications, plagiarism and self-plagiarism, among others, that authors use to boost their number of publications. These issues are individually discussed below:

- *Lack of criteria for paper authorship.* This problem happens when authorship credits do not follow clear criteria for each author's contribution to the study and may include practices such as *gift authorship* – "providing authorship to a colleague, senior or junior, in exchange for favours performed by the recipient"; *honorary authorship* – "adding senior academics in an organization as authors because they may have provided funding, access to facilities or facilitated the research in some other way"; *guest authorship* – "including a senior researcher in the list of authors enhances its chances of publication or impact"; and *ghost authorship* – "occurs when an individual who has made a substantial contribution to the publication is not included as an author and is usually not even acknowledged anywhere in the

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publication" (Khezr & Mohan, 2022, p. 2–3). Such practices have been common and reward scholars who do not effectively contribute to the development of the research, sometimes compromising the consequences of their research (Moher, 2014). Instead of encouraging collaboration, such practices create a "production line" based on exchanging favours whose purpose is the publication at any cost. For more information, see the recommendations of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) [1].

- *Redundant publications* are a severe consequence of the problem mentioned above. The high number of articles with similar structures, theoretical positioning, data sets and core contributions overloads editors and reviewers, decreases research impact and endangers the good standing of journals (Noè & Batten, 2006). Duplicate publication is the second most frequent reason for the retracted articles published by Brazilian researchers; it creates a problem called "post-retraction-citations" (Santos-d'Amorim, Melo, & Santos, 2021a; Santos-d'Amorim, Correia, Miranda, & Santa-Cruz, 2021b), which happens when a retracted article continues to be cited to support further research (Santos-d'Amorim et al., 2021a).
- Connected with the two topics above, *plagiarism* and *self-plagiarism* comprise the integral or partial copy and/or reuse of others' and one self's words, ideas or images (according to the American Psychological Association [2]). The problem is the most frequent reason for the retractions of articles published by Brazilian researchers (Santos-d'Amorim et al., 2021a, 2021b). In an attempt to publish as many articles as possible, authors "slice" a research project into very specific parts based on the same research problem, theoretical foundations and data without bringing originality or any substantial contribution. Editors and reviewers from diverse areas have paid attention to it and used editorials to educate scholars and promote good practices to mitigate these problems (Eaton & Crossman, 2018; Lin, 2020). Teixeira da Silva (2017, p. 943) gives us a good perspective on it: "When done mistakenly, it constitutes a serious error, and when done deliberately, it constitutes an act of misconduct because it misleads the editors, peers, and ultimately, the public". The negative impact of such actions on the academic community cannot be overstated.

As the reader can notice, the problems described above are not only numerous but also really serious. Nevertheless, the "publish or perish" phenomenon is more commonly seen from the author's perspective than the academic journal's. It is quite clear that editorial management also faces a complex issue. Two questions arise from this scenario. Firstly, how are academic journals affected by all these complicated issues? Secondly, how can they redirect their practices and priorities to address these issues? In the following sections, we will try to shed some light on these inquiries.

Implications for editorial management

The first noticeable effect of this scenario on journals is the increase in the quantity of low-quality papers produced. This leads to heavier workloads for editors and reviewers. Specifically regarding *editors*, they will need to understand better how to filter more and more papers during the desk review process and develop new practices and policies before proceeding to the actual review. The increase in the number of papers submitted also leads to an increase in time spent reading them, deciding which ones will proceed to be blind-reviewed and which will be desk rejected. Desk rejection is time-consuming, as the editor must also write the reasons for rejecting the article in the hope that those recommendations can contribute to authors in their next submission (more often to another journal). Due to the

high number of low-quality paper submissions, the top journals' desk rejection rate is usually high. It is important to note that the increase in quantity is not a problem *per se* if these papers are of good quality. The problem arises at the expense of robust results and its implications. To reduce this difficulty and guide researchers to develop and submit papers of higher impact, special sessions such as "Meet the Editors" are given at major conferences, where editors can discuss with the audience the most significant problems encountered in the papers submitted and give recommendations on how to improve. Some journals are also leaning towards mixed-methods papers, as this type of research leads to more profound contributions.

In the case of *reviewers*, we face two significant challenges. The first, arising from the authorship attribution problem, occurs when a scholar who has published an article in a particular journal declines the invitation to review articles submitted to that journal. Such refusals are common, one of the justifications being that the selected reviewer lacks expertise on the article's topic or method. However, suppose an author signs an article that applies certain concepts, theories and methods; in that case, we assume he/she is an expert, at least, in one of these aspects. A second issue, directly linked to the previous, is the burden on serious and collaborative reviewers. They are often authors of articles published in the journal who provide constructive comments, meet deadlines and always collaborate in the review process. As "recognition", they receive more manuscripts to review. We have dealt with this controversial theme in a previous editorial (Albergaria, Hourneaux Junior, & Dionizio Leite, 2021).

The second effect concerns safety measures for increasing digitalisation and artificial intelligence (AI) use. Since the public release of ChatGPT in 2022, transparency regarding the scientific text-writing process has been a concern in academia to prevent plagiarism and the use of artificial intelligence tools, especially ChatGPT, as a writing assistant, which has become a common practice among authors (Imran & Almusharraf, 2023). Journals must deal with the actual role of the authors in this process, considering that AI is not an author and all the responsibilities for writing an article still will fall on the authors themselves (COPE, 2023).

Thirdly, as the interest in publications rises, the opportunities for publications will also increase; it is a simple supply and demand logic. Of course, as in any industry, not all participants will follow the best practices. So, what can good journals do not to be caught in the middle of so many "bad apples"? The so-called "predatory" publishing is an increasing phenomenon that afflicts academics with multiple and systemic causes (Mills & Inouye, 2021). Predatory journals are usually characterised by soliciting authors to submit their authors, charging them high Article Publishing Charges (APCs) and using little to no peer review in the evaluation process; all characteristics of questionable editorial and publication practices (Mills & Inouye, 2021). Then, to prevent being considered predatory, good journals must strictly follow the best practices and assume their accountability in the academic community.

Fourthly, the need to publish more and more also gave rise to "paper mills", ghostwritten fraudulent or fabricated manuscripts and submission services. This practice brings severe consequences for journals and, therefore, for editors. The lack of transparency in the data report may prevent the research community from knowing if such results are real or fake. Also, as many universities use lists of acceptable journals to evaluate their scholars, paper mills are likelier to target their submissions to indexed journals (Byrne & Christopher, 2020).

Of course, all these issues need to be urgently addressed to prevent the proliferation of articles (or journals) that do not comply with the academic standards we all expect.

The world has changed, and so should academic journals

In conclusion, we can summarise some relevant aspects that surge as solutions or mitigations to the bad practices undermining editorial management and, consequently, the reputation of academic journals globally.

The need for rules and compliance urges. A significant change in the culture of publications was set out in 2012 with the DORA (Declaration on Research Assessment). It seeks to improve how scholarly research outputs are evaluated using metrics beyond the journal impact factor as the only or most significant proxy for assessing an individual scientist's contributions or in hiring, promoting or funding decisions (DORA, 2024). DORA's list of recommendations includes (i) considering qualitative indicators of research impact, such as the influence on policy and practice, and (ii) indicating to early-career scholars that the scientific content of a paper is much more important than publication metrics. This movement contributes to shifting the focus from merely the number of publications to a broader assessment of the actual contribution of scholars' research to society.

As their roles continuously increase, we need more qualified and responsible editors and reviewers (Babin & Moulard, 2018). Their roles are becoming increasingly essential for keeping the editorial processes running. Nevertheless, we do not see an effort to develop their competences as much as we can notice the extensive efforts to develop authors' competences; it seems unbalanced and maybe unfair, given that the editorial system will collapse without editors and especially reviewers.

Moreover, we will also need better systems and tools, such as AI tools, to facilitate editorial processes and help editorial teams be more effective. Although natural language processing programs help organise data and even improve text flow, their indiscriminate use can lead to problems such as information inaccuracy, bias and the lack of innovative ideas (Elbanna & Child, 2023; Hosseini, Rasmussen, & Resnik, 2023).

Finally, interestingly, new stakeholders have risen in reaction to the problems we have discussed here. We can see that more and more services are dedicated to informing the academic community about the abovementioned problems, and several platforms and websites[3] specialise in informing the academic community about bad practices in the academic editorial processes.

In short, there are many problems, but there are also many ways to solve them. We hope the editorial teams worldwide win these battles for the sake of the academic community.

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Notes

1. International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) Defining the Role of Authors and Contributors. Available at: www.icmje.org/recommendations/browse/roles-and-responsibilities/defining-the-role-of-authors-and-contributors.html. These recommendations have been guiding many schools, researchers and journals from several areas. According to the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE), four criteria guide the authorship attribution: i) substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work; or the acquisition, analysis or interpretation of data for the work; AND ii) drafting the work or reviewing it critically for important intellectual content; AND iii) final approval of the version to be published; AND iv) agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.
2. APA – Plagiarism and self-plagiarism definitions. Available at: https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/citations/plagiarism#:~:text=Plagiarism%20is%20the%20act%20of,the%20credit%20they%20are%20due
3. For instance, https://retractionwatch.com/ and www.stm-assoc.org/stm-integrity-hub/

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