

Dispersed publication of editorial research

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: There seems to be no dedicated journals available for publication of editorial research in the biomedical sciences; that is research into editorial or publication process issues involving the scientific approach to writing, reviewing, editing and publishing. It is unknown where papers concerning these issues are typically published. We therefore set out to study the distribution of such papers in the biomedical literature.

METHODS: In this pilot study, we conducted a MEDLINE search for papers on editorial research published in the year 2012.

RESULTS: We found 445 articles published in 311 journals with a median of one article per journal (range: 1-17).

CONCLUSION: The publication of papers on editorial research seems to be dispersed. In order to increase the visibility of this research field, it may be reasonable to establish well-defined platforms such as dedicated journals or journal sections in which such research could preferably be published.

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Good ethical standards for biomedical research also include standards for the reporting of results [1]. As in other disciplines, bias and other confounders may be involved in the publication process, and it is therefore important to document and study these mechanisms which ultimately may have great impact on the clinical care of patients. Research into biomedical publication is becoming increasingly common; however, no journals are dedicated to this important subject [2]. If articles about editorial and publishing issues are published in numerous and non-specialised journals, the visibility and impact of relevant research may be reduced and potentially interested readers may have difficulties staying updated.

The aim of this study was to evaluate where research into biomedical publication is published and to discuss relevant solutions that may increase the visibility and availability of the published research.

METHODS

To identify research articles about editorial and publication issues in the biomedical sciences, we conducted this pilot study with a MEDLINE search using the following

title search terms: “publication”, “editing”, “peer review”, “authorship”, “plagiarism”, “contributorship”, “editorial polices”, “publishing”, “publication bias”. All types of articles published in English in 2012 were eligible for inclusion. When a potential match was found, two persons screened the title and abstract for relevance. Cases of disagreement were resolved by discussion. For included articles, the name of the publishing journal was recorded. Data were analysed descriptively and medians and ranges were reported. No statistical tests were applied. This study required no ethical approval, and trial registration was not relevant.

Trial registration: not relevant.

RESULTS

The MEDLINE search yielded 1,009 results. Screening of titles and abstracts excluded 564 articles due to either topic or language. The included 445 articles were published in 311 different journals with a median of one article per journal (range: 1-17). A total of 256 journals had only published one article on publication or editorial research. The ten journals publishing most articles in 2012 published 80 articles on the subject, with a median of seven articles per journal (range: 5-17) (**Figure 1**).

DISCUSSION

The principal finding of our study was that research articles on editorial and publication issues in the biomedical sciences are published in numerous different journals. Most of these journals published only one or very few articles, and none of the journals had a section dedicated to publication or editorial research.

There is growing focus on ethics in research as well as in the publication process. A recent code of conduct white paper has been published by the Danish Ministry of Higher Education and Science [1], and the topic has been a specific focus of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors for many years [3]. Research into publishing and editing is developing into a field of its own as evidenced by dedicated international meetings and congresses where posters and oral presentations of original research are presented. However, only 61% of studies presented at previous international congresses on peer review and biomedical publication have subsequently been fully published [4].

Many different drivers seek to position editorial re-

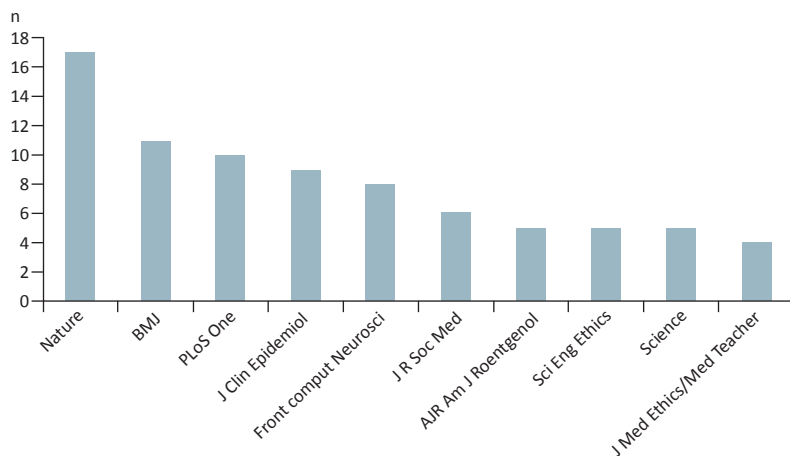
ORIGINAL ARTICLE

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FIGURE 1

Number of articles on publication research in 2012 in the ten journals publishing most about this theme.



search as a formal discipline of its own, including the BMJ and the Journal of the American Medical Association [5]. Furthermore, international societies also focus specifically on these issues; one of these is the European Association of Science Editors (EASE) which publishes the journal *European Science Editing*. This journal, however, rarely publishes original research. Various international medical writers' associations also have their own membership journals which, of course, focus on writing issues, but their target groups are narrow and they are not internationally indexed journals exclusively containing papers on editorial research issues. For the general or average researcher, the issue of research on publications is relevant as it may serve to build an understanding of the mechanisms behind the publications process, identify risks for publication bias and clarify issues on study funding and the associated risks of bias, etc. Publications research issues should therefore be mandatory in PhD and other research programme curricula around the world.

A new journal with a focus on publication issues is named "Publications"; it is an open-access journal covering all aspects of academic, scholarly and professional publishing. However, it covers all disciplines and not only the biomedical areas. The Journal of Korean Medical Science has recently taken another initiative by creating a special section on editing, writing and publishing, and this journal will incorporate evidence-based overviews of editorial practices, original research papers, viewpoint pieces and news items written by local and international contributors [6]. They have appointed the current chief editor of the *European Science Editing Journal* to head the new section for the *Journal of Korean Medical Science*. The *Danish Medical Journal* is

now following the same path and has created a similar section in which research papers focusing on editorial and publishing issues can be published [2].

This study had a number of limitations. By searching only MEDLINE, articles published in journals not indexed in this database were not retrieved. In order to minimise the risk of missing relevant articles, we could have included articles published in other languages than English, added additional search terms and performed topic/MESH-term searches instead of title searches. Regarding the one-year time search window of 2012, it might have provided valuable information if we had extended the time window and thus allowed for analysis of trends and patterns over time. Besides the name of the publishing journal, we could have recorded additional information, for instance article type, distribution of different articles types, including the number of original research articles versus other article types. Despite these limitations, we were able to show that articles on publications research were published in many different journals.

CONCLUSION

We found that articles on the subject of biomedical publications research were published in more than 300 different non-specialised journals. The fact that there is not a single journal dedicated to this important subject may reduce the visibility, availability and impact of published research. The academic, biomedical environment therefore needs a journal specialised in editorial and publication research, or, alternatively, dedicated sections in selected general medical journals.

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