



CONTRIBUTIONS

Editors Are Editors, Not Oracles

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Farji-Brener and Kitzberger (2014; hereafter FBK) resurrect the issues of Farji-Brener (2007) concerning manuscripts that are submitted to journals but that are not sent out for peer review: a process we call “reject following editorial review” (RFER). We thank FBK for reviving discussion about this important topic as new challenges, including new publication outlets, peer-review models, and an increasingly complex and voluminous scientific literature, are emerging across the publication

landscape. While we disagree with FBK's perspective and conclusions, we recognize that this discussion can help to improve editorial and publication processes, and we welcome the opportunity to inform the ecological community about the current status of editorial practice at ESA journals.

FBK misunderstand the two key reasons for RFER. The first is that the primary goal of the RFER process is not, as FBK suggest it is, to evaluate "quality" of manuscripts, but rather to prioritize external review for those papers that best fit the goals and scopes of the different journals published by ESA. Second, RFER is necessary for any journal that receives more submissions than a finite, and increasingly overburdened, pool of external reviewers can evaluate. We also note that FBK's data are biased and sparse, so their conclusions about editorial practices among the journals are unreliable.

The title of FBK, "Are editors of ecological journals good oracles?" asks the wrong question. Except when glaring errors in design, analysis, logic, or mathematics are identified, ESA editors do not RFER manuscripts based on scientific "quality." Instead, RFER decisions are based on explicit, published criteria (Peters et al. 2011): Is the paper within scope of the journal? Is the finding of broad and general interest? Is the subject area over-subscribed? FBK's focus on impact factors as a measure of quality does not account for the fact that each journal has its own unique scope and goal. What makes a paper a great fit for *Proceedings of the Royal Society of London* is not necessarily the same as what makes it a great fit for *Ecology*. Similarly, journals with similar impact factors target different readerships, have different mission statements, different scopes, and thus should accept different flavors of papers.

Even journals published by a single society recognize distinctions. A submission to *Ecology*, for example, may be judged as falling more within the scope of *Ecological Applications*, *Ecological Monographs*, *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*, *Ecosphere*, or the *Bulletin of the ESA*. Shifting manuscripts among our journals requires additional work on the part of both editors and authors. The manuscript might need rewriting or reframing to improve the fit for the sister journal. Such manuscripts are often RFER but simultaneously invited by the Editor-in-Chief of the sister journal to submit after reframing and rewriting. Similar "reject/invites" are used by other societies, yet may have been mistakenly identified as "rejections" by FBK. Oversubscription of subject-matter areas is a particular concern of ESA journals, which have broad scope and cover many subject-matter areas. We increase RFER in topical areas experiencing high submission rates to preserve space for the diversity of other topics that we publish.

It is not incumbent upon scientific journals to provide reviews for every paper submitted (Farji-Brener 2007, FBK). Sending every submission out for external peer review would overwhelm the editorial processes of popular journals, and would result in many reviews concluding the paper was

more suitable for some other journal. We deem this latter outcome to be a waste of reviewer time, since the goal of peer review is a technical assessment. This fact is widely appreciated and needs to be part of any objective discussion of the scientific publishing process (compare FBK with Strong 2007 and Peters et al. 2011). FBK provide no alternative solution to the problem of more submissions than journals can review. Neither our editors nor our reviewers could possibly review every submission to our journals, and this is the case for many other journals as well.

FBK considered 65 cases of rejection after editorial review and found that all but 10 were published in other journals (FBK, Table 1). By focusing on manuscripts that were resubmitted without revision, FBK biased their sample toward only one type of RFER submission. The other categories include those papers that were substantially revised, or even abandoned, after a RFER, and such papers almost certainly would have had (on average) a much lower acceptance rate elsewhere had they been resubmitted without revision. It is impossible to know how large the sample bias is without much more substantial study, but we are confident that FBKs data substantially overestimate the fraction of RFER manuscripts that successfully could be published elsewhere without revision.

In addition to being biased, the sample size itself (65 RFER manuscripts) is much too small to be used to judge outcomes of RFER at multiple journals over multiple years. We illustrate this point with data from all of the manuscripts submitted to *Ecology* in a single year. In 2013, 500 (36%) of 1371 submissions were RFER. Were *Ecology* in 2013 to represent all of the data, the four “representative” successful resubmissions of RFERs (FBK: Table 1) would be less than 1% of the total (4/500). We cannot determine whether the four papers in FBK’s Table 1 were submitted to *Ecology* in different years. If they were, then each additional year would approximately halve their successful resubmission rate (the RFER rates at *Ecology* were 44% in 2012, 36% in 2013, and have been 41% as of 15 July 2014). Thus, FBK’s total of 55 successes out of 65 RFER submissions amounts to less than 1% of all submissions, given the multiple journals and multiple years implied by their paper. Even if FBK’s results are accepted at face value, they do not show that this outcome differs in any way from papers rejected following external peer review. Overall, it is not possible to judge accurately this rate from their study. The summary results presented provide insufficient evidence to support their conclusions, and FBK neither explain their methodology sufficiently nor provide pertinent raw data.

Across the ESA family of journals, no submission is rejected based “only upon the opinion of one person” about quality (FBK, page 238). Rather, RFER of a submission occurs only after two or more subject-matter editors (SMEs)—including at least one who has deep expertise in its methods and systems—have reviewed the submission against explicit, published, journal-specific criteria (Peters et al. 2011, not cited by FBK). Having multiple SMEs evaluate a submission also minimizes effects of

potential biases of individual SMEs; if there is any disagreement among the recommendations, the manuscript normally is assigned to an SME and sent out for additional, external peer review. This procedure adds work and increases the time SMEs spend handling the manuscript, but is considered an important aspect of their editorial duties. Editors and editorial boards of journals published by other scientific societies and legitimate commercial publishers have similar editorial procedures. In short, editors, not authors, determine whether a manuscript is a good “fit” for a given journal.

Many authors express appreciation for the rapid feedback of a RFER. Our experience has taught us that speed is important to authors, despite assertions to the contrary by FBK, and learning quickly that a journal does not find a submission to be a good fit is valuable to all authors, ourselves included. FBK emphasize editorial error in decisions to RFER. But how could it be construed as an error for an editor to reject without review a paper that is outside the scope of the journal? And how is that error compounded if the authors then send it to a more appropriate journal where it is accepted and published? We take pride in our editors’ ability to identify exciting, important, and useful papers within the scope of the ESA family of journals, and we are more than pleased that other deserving papers not published at ESA journals appear elsewhere.

Literature cited

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