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Safeguarding science: The centrality of publication ethics

Organization

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Abstract

This Speaking Out attends to the opacity and injustice of scientific manuscript evaluation. Its focus is upon the embeddedness of editors, reviewers and authors in a moral order conditioned by an asymmetrical structure of power relations that is sustained by deference and secrecy. Attention is given to the shortcomings of complaints and appeals procedures that currently provide the principal, non-independent means of safeguarding science by interrogating the adequacy of manuscript evaluation processes. To transform the structure of power relations, and thereby strengthen the “gold standard” of peer review, some ways of increasing the openness and accountability of manuscript evaluation are proposed.

Keywords

Accountability, blinding of reviews, ethics of care, power, procedural ethics, publication ethics, transparency

What makes publication ethics worth “speaking out” about? In peer review, ethics distinguish what is “good” or “bad,” and “right” or “wrong,” about the conduct of authors, reviewers and editors engaged in producing and evaluating scientific knowledge claims. Somehow, the role of publishers is widely omitted from discussion of publication ethics even though they create and maintain framework of policies, guidelines and investigative procedures devised to ensure ethical conduct (Tancock, 2024). Publishers also have significant influence over editorial appointments, not least because the final decision invariably requires sign-off by the publisher who issues a contact to the incoming editor(s).

In this *Speaking Out*, the safeguarding of science is not restricted to the “natural sciences”: it encompasses other (e.g. social) sciences, including those that take “management” and “organization” as phenomena of scientific interest. “*Scientific* knowledge” is distinguished here by the

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degree of intensity to which its claims are scrutinized by *peers*. Peers are defined as those with a depth of expertise equivalent to the author(s) of the evaluated manuscript. In principle, peer evaluation of knowledge claims “enables science to go beyond its own findings” (Osborne, 1998: 53) although, in practice, forms of epistemic oppression (Dotson, 2014; Willmott, 2022) result in this aspiration being imperfectly and incompletely fulfilled.

Publication ethics comprise the practices considered to ensure the trustworthiness of scientific research and scholarship. They are pivotal to editorial processes, including the selection of reviewers, assessment of their reports, and acceptance or rejection of submitted manuscripts. Bodies such as the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) make explicit what is expected of those—notably, editors, reviewers and authors—engaged in processes of manuscript submission and evaluation. Reviewers, for example, “are expected to provide” reports that offer “constructive feedback” that is “clear and helpful to authors.”¹ The role of editors and reviewers, it has been cautioned, is “not for those who wonder what they will gain from the position” (DeNesi, 2008: 87, emphasis added). Instead, these roles are for “those who imagine what they can *give* to the field” (DeNesi, 2008: 87). The latter generous conception of evaluative work is congruent with an ethic of care (Diprose, 2002), conceived to be an ontological condition of interdependence with others. “Primordially,” Diprose (2002: 4–5) writes, “generosity is not the expenditure of one’s possessions but the dispossession of oneself, the being-given to others that undercuts any self-contained ego. . . and so eschews the calculation characteristic of an economy of exchange.” Manuscript evaluation enabled by an ethics of care safeguards, rather than subverts or endangers, the peer-warranted credibility of science.

The ethic of care, as conceived by Diprose, likely mitigates the risk of author misconduct and other abuses in the manuscript evaluation process. If this ethic is to be practiced, rather than simply urged, however, it is important to *show*, and not just tell, how evaluation processes are undertaken—diligently or carelessly. Greater openness, as Watling et al. (2021: 302) conclude, can “improve the quality and tone of reviews” and thereby contribute to the safeguarding of science. In this *Speaking Out*, the target of critique is not peer review. Nor is it open access, the focus upon metrics, the rise of predatory journals or other of drivers of “junkification” (Rhodes and Linnenluecke, 2025). Rather, its target is the *opacity* of manuscript evaluation which results from the “blinding” of reviews,² while acknowledging that reviewers as well as authors may receive a copy of editors’ decision letters and that some journals publish the name of the action editor responsible for accepting published manuscripts.

The next section notes how, in manuscript evaluation processes, the collegial norm of reciprocity masks and mystifies asymmetries of power. It then reflects upon the moral order of scientific publication conceived as an amalgam of decontextualized prescriptions and situated judgments. Next, consideration is given to how “good” publication ethics are fostered or frustrated before exploring how complaints, appeals, corrections and retractions illuminate publication ethics. A discussion section elaborates on challenges faced by authors who suspect transgressions of publication ethics and addresses how bodies like COPE, funded by publishers with an espoused mission to advance excellence in publication ethics, engage in ethics-washing.³ The conclusion addresses the question of what can be done to safeguard science.

Reciprocity subverted by asymmetrical relations of Power

When “speaking out” about manuscript evaluation, it is relevant to note that editors and reviewers are also, or have been, authors. Being the recipients of reviewers’ reports and editors’ letters would, it might be imagined or hoped, prompt and enable reviewers and editors to take on the role of the other (Mead, 1934), resulting in their treatment of manuscripts with diligence, care and informed

criticism accompanied by suggestions for improvement. However, framing the process of manuscript evaluation within the “norm of reciprocity” (Gouldner, 1960) risks disregarding, or being wilfully blind to, how an *asymmetrical* structure of power relations positions editors and reviewers, as evaluators of manuscripts, in a superordinate relationship to authors. Writing as *editors*, Dean and Forray (2019: 6) note how, in the manuscript evaluation process, “. . . significant power [is] vested in all journal editors,” and this extends to reviewers whose reports inform editorial decisions (see also Frost and Taylor, 1995). As gatekeepers charged with assessing reviewer reports, editors dispense significant material and symbolic resources that include the means of gaining tenure and the bestowal of badges of scholarly esteem. When evaluating *what* counts as scientific knowledge, reviewers and editors also judge *who* does, or does not, contribute to the scientific body of knowledge. Symptomatic of the asymmetry of power between editors and authors, editorials draw attention to the misconduct of authors who “cut corners” for which “there is really no excuse” (Harley et al., 2014: 1362) but are silent on editorial misconduct, the misconduct of reviewers or their responsiveness to pressures exerted by commercial publishers.

In an asymmetrical relationship, a supplicant is a person who makes “an earnest plea to someone in power or authority” (Oxford Dictionary of English). When submitting a manuscript, authors pray for it to be reviewed by careful—informed and diligent—peers, enabling the paper to be improved and eventually included in the published body scientific work. However, resentments, frustrations and sadistic tendencies ascribed to the fabled “Reviewer 2” “lurk within all of us” (Krlev and Spicer, 2023: 1631), including when acting in an editorial capacity. The Reviewer 2 meme speaks to reviewer reports that are “rude, vague, smug, committed to pet issues, theories, and methodologies, and unwilling to treat the authors as peers” (Watling et al., 2021: 299). In thrall to liberal individualism (Macpherson, 1962), “Reviewer 2” takes the opportunity to assert authoritative proprietorship of an expertise that elevates him or her above hapless authors. Mr Hyde, the careless or delinquent reviewer or editor who abuses and debases *peer* review, is the alter ego of Dr Jekyll, the supplicant author. Editors may perpetrate, or be complicit in, abuses of publication ethics that range from the casual selection of unsuitable reviewers to tolerance or normalization of careless and/or unconstructive reviewer reports.

The work of reviewing and editing is undoubtedly ethically demanding (Eden, 2008: 242–245), not least when “difficult interpersonal situations of conflict and process management” (Lund Dean, 2024: 84) are encountered over questions of procedure, for example, as well as more substantive considerations. The secrecy surrounding manuscript evaluation is routinely inscribed within journals’ terms and conditions: unauthorized disclosures of communications (e.g. between editors and authors) risk sanctions or even legal redress. Comparable to non-disclosure agreements (NDAs), small print protects editors, reviewers and publishers from unwelcome revelations that potentially damage a journal’s reputation; and, more painfully, can impact revenue streams and profitability. Secrecy impedes the detection and correction of possible abuses, and fuels suspicion of manuscript misevaluation. When the work of evaluation is *not* “seen to be done,” publication ethics may be transgressed, whether deliberately or casually, with impunity. Without accountability and transparency, opportunities to discover or discount alleged abuses are curtailed, making allegations of “bad practice,” such as undisclosed conflicts of interest, difficult—but not impossible (Mindel and Ciriello, 2025)—to substantiate. A dearth of evidence of abuse then enables defenders of the status quo to doubt or deny the very existence of significant and avoidable abuses of editorial and reviewer power.

Whatever may be the ostensibly virtuous intentions of “blinding”—to reduce prestige bias and protect vulnerable scholars, for example—its operation is “anti-dialogical” (Freire, 2012): hierarchical, opaque and controlling. In addition to concealing possible transgressions of publication ethics, “blinding” denies access to instances of insightful and constructive editorial work.

Illuminating and developmental reviewer reports, and evidence of editors' finely balanced assessments, are lost to the scientific community. This loss is not remedied by the annual listing of reviewers by some journals, especially where no account is taken of the quality of their reports. Nor is the shortcoming ameliorated by *Publons*,⁴ owned by private equity Onex and Baring Asia, which simply records and monetizes (freely provided) reported activity.

By situating peer review within an asymmetrical structure of power relations, it is appreciated how the relationship between manuscript evaluators and supplicant authors is unequal, but its *not zero-sum*. Authors may withdraw their manuscripts; and they may be courted by editors seeking the submission of their manuscripts. Nonetheless, the blinding process of evaluation processes articulates and institutionalizes the asymmetry that shields editors and reviewers from accountability, often in the name of protecting reviewers from authors or vice-versa. Forms of open review (open identities, open reports and open participation), in contrast, enable evaluations to be subjected to a measure of critical scrutiny (Enslin and Hedge, 2018). The form of open review commended here refers to the comparatively modest measure of publishing the peer review history after an article is accepted (which is a version of "open reports")—a transparency that would reveal whether, for example, conflicts of interests of the handling editor had been avoided or declared. Revealing misconduct in processes of evaluating rejected (i.e. unpublished) manuscripts would require much greater openness than the modest increase in transparency and accountability being proposed here.

The moral order of scientific publication

Moral orders are conceived here as shared ethical frameworks, beliefs, and norms that define what is considered right and wrong, good and bad, and what people can reasonably expect from each other in particular sets of relations,⁵ such as author-editor-reviewer relationships. The moral order of scientific publication comprises *decontextualized prescriptions* (e.g. codes of practice) and *situated judgments* (e.g. improvised adjudications made by reviewers and editors). Codified prescriptions emerge out of, and objectify, situated judgments. Inter alia, they proscribe plagiarized content (e.g. Schminke and Ambrose, 2011), data fabrication⁶ and inappropriate assignment of authorship credit (Bedeian et al., 2010). They also specify appropriate responses to detected transgressions taking the form of rejection, correction, retraction, etc. (e.g. Tsui et al., 2014).

Practical application of the prescriptions that comprise codes of conduct, for example, may (somewhat paradoxically) foster an appreciation of the endemic presence of situated judgments in processes of authoring, editing and reviewing. But it may also displace the exercise of judgment by substituting the enactment of procedure. Situated judgments, in contrast to decontextualized prescriptions, are marked by contestation regarding whether, for example, a transgression has occurred, the significance attributed to it, and how to address it. In short, the exercise of *situated* judgment involves greater interpretation than compliance with prescriptions (Bauman, 1987).

In principle, the moral order of scientific evaluation practices facilitates, although its secretiveness may also impede, the appointment of "diverse editorial boards [and teams] *capable of properly assessing* the quality of scholarship from the various traditions" (Konrad, 2008: 8, emphasis added). The assignment of a manuscript to a "capable" action editor; the subsequent selection of "capable" reviewers; and the diligent and informed assessment of their reports by the action editor, are particularly fateful decisions (Bedeian, 2004: 203; see also Resnik and Elmore, 2016). At these moments, editorial decisions are made—astutely, thoughtfully, even-handedly, expediently, carelessly, negligently or even maliciously—that have far-reaching consequences for science and its producers.

A recent study (Mindel and Ciriello, 2025) shows how, in two FT50 management journals, editors handling manuscripts are frequently associates of authors (e.g. past co-authors)—a cronyist practice that transgresses publication ethics. During the period 2010–2024, 952 author editor links were found across 783 papers. Among those links, 49.7% involved a likely conflict of interest (COI) and in an additional 10.2% COIs were identified as possible but not definitive. Amongst the instances of editorial COIs, the most prevalent (53.4%) was reciprocal acceptance where editors and authors have handled each other’s papers and co-authorship (17.6%). The incidence of COIs in these top-tier journals increased from 17.9% in 2010 to 41.2% in 2024. As the authors of the study observe, “at least half of the publications. . . (comprising a quarter of total journal output) fail the reasonable observer standard widely upheld in editorial ethics codes” (Mindel and Ciriello, 2025: 3).

Where cronyism is not the basis for manuscript evaluation, reviewer selection is increasingly guided and semi-automated by the matching of keywords selected by manuscript authors (often restricted by the epistemic blinkers of the architects of the submission software), to those supplied by prospective referees which are also often restricted to the keywords provided by the software. This gatekeeping process, which AI may soon replace, is procedurally rational. Ostensibly, it identifies the most suitable expert reviewers. It is also formally ethical insofar as, in principle, reviewer selection based on cronyism or ignorance are replaced by those with declared specialist expertise. However, if minimal consideration is given to differences in how the “same” topic, or keyword, is approached from radically different perspectives, outcomes of the impersonal match-making procedure can be incongruous. If a mismatch of manuscript and reviewers is to be avoided, action editors must be capable of making informed and careful situated judgments about the proposed reviewers.

Prospective reviewers who are not “equally versed in the field of research in which they are being asked to review” (Bedeian, 2004: 212), perhaps because they have been identified by a semi-automatic process, may nonetheless “helpfully” accept an invitation to evaluate a manuscript. Such misdirected invitations—which may be difficult to decline for junior scholars seeking to build their CVs and who do not wish to disappoint or frustrate more senior action editors—may have deleterious consequences for science as well as the ill-starred author(s) (Brewis, 2021; Schapiro and Bartunek, 2008; Tsang, 2013). Concern that the basic requirement of “rough equivalence” (Bedeian, 2004: 209) of expertise between authors and reviewers is often unfulfilled is reflected in the findings of a survey where 36.6% of “top-tier” Academy of Management Review/Academy of Management Journal reviewers “acknowledged submitting a critique for a manuscript they felt incompetent to review” (Bedeian, 2004: 203). As evaluation processes are cloaked in secrecy, it is impossible to know if this situation has improved. Where cronyism does not prevail, poor alignment of reviewers and manuscripts is an indicator of a lack of editorial care that fails, rather than safeguards, science.

Such concerns about manuscript evaluation processes should doubtless be situated in the context of numerous practical contingencies, including overstretched editors and pressures from publishers to generate more “product” to monetize (Montgomery et al., 2025). These considerations compound the difficulty of nurturing the moral order of scientific evaluation (Honig et al., 2014) and curtailing possible abuses of power, whether vindictive or careless, by reviewers and editors. Posing the rhetorical question “why [do] some editors abuse their power?” (Dean and Forray, 2019: 6) respond: “Because they can,” adding that power relations in academia comprise similar dynamics of unaccountability to those existing “outside of academia. . .”: [namely], a pattern maintained by a “*lack of transparency and resistance*” (Dean and Forray, 2019: 6, emphasis added). Calls for greater transparency are countered by claims that it produces data overload, damages trust and sows confusion. This defense of the status quo presumes that there *is* trust in the evaluation

process. It also infantilizes academics by underestimating their/our capacity to sift and sort information. Where power is exercised *without* accountability or transparency, abuses are more likely and more difficult to detect. Despite the potential of greater transparency to reveal misconduct, and thereby strengthen manuscript evaluation, it is telling that editors rarely promote greater transparency and accountability (Alford, 2001; Hertsgaard, 2016).

Consider the responses to the study, sketched above, that found numerous COIs at FT50 journals (Mindel and Ciriello, 2025). The editor of one such journal (Academy of Management Journal, AMJ) reportedly declared that the study showed “a deliberate quest to identify some wrongdoing” as if the concern to safeguard science by detecting wrongdoing is illegitimate.⁷ That declaration is illustrative of editorial resistance to calls for greater transparency as a possible means of exposing and minimizing misconduct. Another editor of a top-tier journal (Academy of Management Review, AMR) is reported to have acknowledged that the evidence of cronyism presented by Mindel and Ciriello (2025) is “concerning” as it damages public trust in science; discourages submissions from authors who lack crony connections; and results in the publication of lower quality papers.⁸ Where there is a conflict of interest associated with editors publishing or co-publishing in their journals, the solution is for publishers to monitor and exclude such practices. However, in the present case, where neither editor is reported to have challenged the findings of Mindel and Ciriello’s (2025) study, there is no indication of an intention to support such a system or to review the allegations of COI. If Academy of Management ethical guidelines, or those of COPE, regarding COIs were breached, that could potentially result in numerous corrections or retractions of articles published in AMJ and AMR. Mass retractions would not be unprecedented as Elsevier recently retracted a dozen papers authored by Professor Brian Lucey and co-authors. As the editor of several finance journals (e.g. *International Review of Financial Analysis*), he oversaw the review of those submissions and made the final decision.⁹

Fostering and frustrating “good” publication ethics

Publication ethics, it has been argued earlier, are associated with making “good” situated judgments characterized as diligent and careful, rather than self-interested, expedient or casual. Such ethics are manifest in the careful composition of desk rejection letters as well as the judicious selection of reviewers and informed assessment of referee reports. Ethical editorial judgments may also, for example, include a steer away from the comments of “Reviewer 2” or the removal and replacement of their report. “Good” judgments are also evident in evaluations that respect the manuscript’s distinctive grammar—that is, the “key concepts and correct ways to relate to them” developed by members of epistemic communities or “research movements” (Clegg et al., 2022: 385). Congruent with an ethics of care (Diprose, 2002; Held, 2006), “good” publication ethics are affirmed by an “ability to think through ethical issues and respond appropriately” (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004: 269)—an ability that is “resonant with a scholarly interest in advancing scientific knowledge “without calculation or expectation of return” (Diprose, 2002: 4).

In addition to reviewers who, as peers, “possess technical expertise at least roughly equivalent to that needed to have originally authored the work to be reviewed (Roth, 2002)” (Bedeian, 2004: 209), signs of ethically “good,” caring manuscript evaluation include the preparation of reports by reviewers who do not “see themselves as superior to the authors” (Clarke et al., 2008: 4; see also Starbuck, 2003). Conversely, and consistent with such qualities, editors who handle manuscripts, and prospective reviewers who are approached to evaluate a submission, “should decline” if there is a COI or when they knowingly lack “the necessary expertise to review manuscripts assigned to them” (Rupp, 2011: 490). Then, when preparing reviews, it is ethically appropriate “to state what one is able to comment on, and what one is not able to comment on, very explicitly in the reviewer

report” (Rupp, 2011: 490). These are indicators, not an exhaustive inventory, of how a publication ethics of care operates to mitigate the risk of avoidable reputational damage to the scientific enterprise as well as the morale and mental health of authors.

An ethics of care differs radically from an ethics of procedure that is exemplified in codes of conduct and best practice guidelines provided for journal editors, such as those issued by Academy of Management¹⁰ and COPE.¹¹ Their focus is upon, for example, ensuring that all manuscripts are handled and evaluated, and every author is addressed, in the same standardized way, such that judgment defers to procedural correctness. Such ethics, as Burrell et al. (2022:936) notes, “quickly become servants of power” as they “provide alibis and eliminate ethical quandaries for those who draw them up.” To take a trivial but instructive example, in a letter from the editor-in-chief of a journal communicating the decision on a manuscript, I am addressed as “Dr Willmott,” despite being on first name terms for decades. Perhaps that display of impartial “correctness” is an artifact of ScholarOne boilerplate that renders editors powerless to make changes to their communications. Or perhaps such impersonality is intended to convey objectivity by masking the existence of a relationship that other authors have yet to develop. Procedural ethics are also manifest in cases where situated, evaluative judgments are ascribed to an abstract body (e.g. the editorial board or the regal “we”; Roth, 2002). The prioritizing of procedural ethics risks crowding out a recognition of, and attentiveness to, how editors and reviewers address or disregard ethical quandries when considering—carefully or carelessly—the substantive content of manuscripts. An emphasis upon procedure is likely to conceal, naturalize and perpetuate asymmetries, dependencies and associated injustices regarding class, gender, ethnicity and language (Dewidar et al., 2022).

Concerning complaints, appeals, corrections and retractions

Despite their limitations, procedural ethics can lend some legitimacy to registering complaints and making appeals when a transgression is suspected. The discourse of publication ethics allows that it is ethically “appropriate [for authors] to question the process handled by those involved” (Ferris, 2008: 159). Making complaints and mounting appeals can contribute to safeguarding the “gold standard”¹² of peer review. Complaints about the integrity of published manuscripts can safeguard science by yielding corrections¹³ or retractions.¹⁴ That said, the lack of transparency and accountability in the processes for addressing complaints and appeals suggests that their purpose is primarily performative: procedures are devised primarily to manage the appearance of safeguarding science in ways that minimize reputational damage.

The comparatively recent introduction of formal procedures for making complaints and mounting appeals is a response to disquiet about the integrity of manuscript evaluation processes—failings that the “gold standard” of peer review aspires to detect and minimize. “[Q]uestion[ing] the process(es)” (Ferris, 2008: 159) of review through channels of complaint and appeal is also, in principle, a means of holding editors and reviewers to account for their assessments, recommendations and decisions. As Smart (2020: 2) notes, the very “power imbalance between editors and authors” is, ethically, what makes it “important to allow authors to appeal rejection decisions.” However, it is this power imbalance, and its associated opacity and unaccountability, that also systemically frustrates the process of remedy and improvement.

Consider the position of the author for whom making complaints and mounting appeals involves significant sacrifices. Apart from the loss of research and/or leisure time, there is the emotional toll of raising concerns; and there is little or no recognition or compensation for calling out suspected abuses. Indeed, as in cases of whistleblowing, “speaking out,” especially publicly, may prompt whispers of sour grapes and accusations of vindictive muckraking as well as cold-shouldering or worse (see Teixeira and da Costa, 2010). Complaints and appeals about suspected malpractices can

be readily disregarded, unanswered, obfuscated or coolly dismissed by editors and publishers who act as “judge and jury” in secret session. Such a charade may account for why, according to a reviewer of this *Speaking Out*, so few complaints and appeals are upheld.

In response to complaints, publishers are content to rely upon procedural ethics that, for example, check whether submission rules were followed, or sufficient reviewers were selected. Typically, publishers exclude investigation of alleged, substantive transgressions on the grounds that editors are solely responsible for matters of substance; and that their decisions are final. In scientific publishing, there is no equivalent of an independent Ombudsman.¹⁵ Also exemplifying the asymmetrical structure of power relations, the content of authors’ complaints and appeals is communicated to editors, but authors do not receive a copy of the communications between publishers, editors and reviewers. Editors, it seems, are comfortable with their complicity in the asymmetrical treatment of their colleagues.

Corrections and, especially, retractions are a source of embarrassment as they cast doubt upon the adequacy of the processes of manuscript evaluation and blinded peer review as the “gold standard” (Tourish and Craig, 2020). They have the potential to provide a window onto careless or ill-informed evaluation work resulting perhaps from the manuscript not being “critiqued from within the paradigm in which [its author(s)] work” (Barley, 2008: 44; Bonache, 2021). Journal editors may be unresponsive to repeated demands for an article to be retracted because it allegedly breaches COPE guidelines to which the journal ostensibly subscribes.

Consider an article by Walumbwa et al. (2008), published in the *Journal of Management* (Sage)¹⁶ currently has over 6000 citations according to Google Scholar. As one (of over 70) commentators on the *PubPeer* website sums up the history of the case: “1) The [*Journal of Management*] accepts a paper that presents obviously impossible statistical results. 2) The journal is alerted to these errors by a reader. 3) The journal takes no action to correct the errors despite the fact that the errors undermine the central claim of the paper and despite the journal’s advertised membership of an ethical group that clearly specifies that such errors must be corrected quickly. 4) The journal gives the paper an award.”¹⁷ Another commentator notes that, coincidentally, the 6000+ citations contribute to the journal’s metrics of prestige and monetary value. The lack of response from the editors and the publisher of the *Journal of Management* to the reported errors in the article may help account for the comparatively low number of retractions in the domain of business and management scholarly (Karabag and Berggren, 2012); and possibly elsewhere; and, more generally, for the glacial speed at which publishers may eventually take remedial action,¹⁸ bringing editorial and review processes, and with them the scientific enterprise, further into disrepute.

Reflecting upon editorial processes that result in the retraction of an article, Hesselmann et al. (2017: 837) observe that such misconduct by *authors* is made visible by retraction; and that this action can be highly consequential for *their* reputation and even their livelihood, In contrast, “the procedures of dealing with [the retraction] remain hidden” as the editors and publishers who are responsible for retraction decisions “stay in the background or remain completely unidentified” (Hesselmann et al., 2017: 837). That is despite, or perhaps because of, misconduct by editors and reviewers being far more fateful systemically. This disparity again exemplifies the asymmetries of power in manuscript evaluation processes.

To give a specific example,¹⁹ there is no explanation of *how* the article by Tseng et al. (2010) published in the *Journal of Business Ethics* (Springer) came to be retracted. What was the process resulting in this outcome? The only “explanation” is that it “contained material previously published by others without appropriate acknowledgment.”²⁰ By April 2025 the article had 77 citations in *Google Scholar*. Despite a retraction notice posted in 2010, the article continued to be cited in the mid 2010s. Indeed, in 2023, the Tseng et al. article was cited in the *Journal of Business Ethics* (see Payne et al., 2023)—the journal from which it had been retracted over a decade earlier! It

seems that the publisher, Springer, and the editors of the journal, were content not to take the necessary steps to alert other publishing houses to the retraction of the article (or those houses ignored the alert). And then they allowed the retracted article to be cited in the Springer journal from which it had been withdrawn.

The general invisibility of transgressions of publication ethics coupled with the non-accountable power of editors as gatekeepers means that failures of publication ethics are rarely researched (for exceptions, see Baylis et al., 2017; Shelomi, 2014; Mindel and Ciriello, 2025). Only the grossest and best documented instances of misconduct tend to come to light (e.g. Light and Warburton, 2008 summarized by Kotchoubey et al., 2015; Smith, 2008). Allegations of misconduct are, moreover, stymied by “an unresolvable ‘he said, she said’ scenario” (Baylis et al., 2017: 143); and commercially consequential allegations are susceptible to threats of litigation by publishers.

The opacity of processes surrounding complaints, appeals, corrections and retractions, which are paralleled by the secrecy of editors’ “accept”/“reject” decisions, illustrates how asymmetrical relations of power are enacted and reproduced in ways that are negatively consequential for the standing and safeguarding of science. If, in the face of resistance from publishers and editors, the impossibility of making a difference by raising concerns is widely assumed and encouraged by senior scholars, then the likelihood reduces of grievances being aired and remedial actions taken. Yet, unless quietism, cynicism or defeatism are to be the preferred or default response, it is important to subject evaluation processes to critical scrutiny and to pursue vigorously instances of possible transgressions of publication ethics.

Discussion

“Speaking out” about publication ethics connects the “private troubles” of authors, experienced as dismay and disgruntlement, to the “public issue” of safeguarding science by ameliorating the integrity of knowledge evaluation processes (Mills, 1959). Disincentives for voicing criticism of the evaluative work of editors and reviewers, outlined above, suggest that transgressions of publication ethics may be more widespread and significant than is suggested by the comparatively small number of corrections and retractions of articles in business and management journals (Tourish and Craig, 2020). Authors who suspect that the evaluation of their rejected manuscript has transgressed publication ethics face an unenviable decision. But if they abjure from challenging the editorial decision, they must abandon their manuscript, or they revise it for submission to another journal to which it was not initially oriented. A reviewer of this *Speaking Out* suggested that the latter course of action is the obvious option, rather than making a complaint about the evaluation process. This advice echoes that tendered to authors of rejected manuscripts by an experienced editor: “don’t fight back” as “as it makes you look argumentative. . . in the minds of reviewers and editors” (Eden, 2008: 246).

The counsel to “suck it up” eases the emotional burden of complaining and awaiting the outcome (which may be an extended silence); it minimizes the author’s opportunity costs; and it involves no reputational risk. However, pragmatically, often there is no equivalent, alternative journal to which the manuscript can be adapted and sent; or the possible alternative home for the manuscript necessitates a significant re-write to reduce it to a publishable length. For example, if this *Speaking Out* had been rejected, where else might it have been submitted? Even with less niche manuscripts, considerable time and effort is required to re-orient their contents to the “conversations” and/or the styles of presentation of another journal that was not the intended target, increasing the risk of rejection. Not to “fight back” makes the author complicit in ignoring or accepting possible abuses of publication ethics. Not only is an opportunity missed to “hold the feet to the fire”²¹ of those—editors and reviewers—responsible for processes of manuscript evaluation; making complaints and mounting appeals also contributes to safeguarding science. When editorial

practice is scrutinized, lessons are potentially learned, and processes of manuscript evaluation can be improved. But scrutiny and improvement requires the cooperation of publishers and editors whose feet are considerably fireproofed.

As an antidote to shortcomings in the processes of manuscript evaluation, Light and Warburton (2008) recommend that all journal publishers join COPE—advice that very many of them have followed. However, COPE is funded by publishers. It is therefore doubted that Light and Warburton's (2008) proposal can be effective in exposing and deterring malpractice. In effect, COPE, whose stated mission is “committed to advancing excellence in publication ethics,”²² provides publishers with a way of signaling concern about abuses of publication ethics without changing the *status quo*.²³ COPE guidelines—which are voluntary—make no connection between *avoidable* abuses of publication ethics, and the lack of transparency and accountability of manuscript evaluation. Indeed, the presence and operation of COPE may, like the prescriptions of ethics review boards (Alvesson and Stevens, 2024), have the perverse effect of further devaluing and displacing the exercise of situational judgment. How, it may be asked, does membership of COPE make it more likely that, for example, handling editors, and especially reviewers, are “equally versed in the field of research in which they are being asked to review” (Bedeian, 2004: 212)?

Remediating abuses of publication ethics requires the establishment of more open²⁴ peer evaluation of scientific manuscripts (Ross-Hellauer, 2017). Opposition to increased openness by publishers and editors is not, of course, framed by them in terms of a self-interested concealment of malpractice or the protection of revenue flows. Instead, secrecy is regarded as a moral imperative that shields (especially junior and minority) reviewers and/or authors whose reports and responses to those reports, if unblinded, might provoke retribution from (more senior) authors/reviewers. While this concern is understandable and not unfounded, the protection afforded to junior or minority reviewers by blinding must be weighed against its perpetuation of probable abuses of editorial and reviewer power that endanger the scientific endeavor of authors. The evidence of cronyism in editorial processes even in the best resourced and most prestigious of management journals (Mindel and Ciriello, 2025) suggests that blinding may be concealing extensive unethical conduct in editorial processes in the field of management and organization studies.

Opponents of more open review claim that it is less candid, as if constructive criticism cannot be conveyed without “Reviewer 2” sadism that risks reprisals. Remarkably, open review is also spurned for requiring greater care, resulting in delays in the turnaround of reviews and making reviewer recruitment more difficult. Justifiable disquiet about possible *episodic* abuses of publication ethics resulting from open review should not overshadow the ethical concern to expose and remedy more *systemic* abuses enabled by the secrecy of 2018. It is not necessary to ignore or downplay shortcomings attributed to open review when making the case that they are counteracted and considerably offset by the prospective improvement of confidence in scientific knowledge evaluation processes. The benefit of open review has been demonstrated by the policy of the long-established and highly esteemed *British Medical Journal*.²⁵

Some editors have simply moved away from commercial publishers to escape their monetizing pressures. In 2023, the entire editorial team of the prestigious *Elsevier* journal, *Neuroimage*, resigned. They established a new journal, *Imaging Neuroscience* published by nonprofit publisher MIT Press, with the ambition of “out-prestiging” their former “employer.”²⁶ In 2025, the editorial team of the *Journal of Philosophical Logic* resigned to protest against *Springer Nature*'s commercialization of the publishing process. They have set up a Diamond Open Access journal at the nonprofit Open Library of Humanities, based at Birkbeck, University of London, titled *Philosophical Logic*.²⁷ Other editors have taken the same decision to leave their commercial publisher and establish a new open access journal where they prioritize scientific values when managing the publishing process.²⁸ Closer to home, the editorial team of *Gender, Work and Organization* (GWO), a

Wiley journal, resigned in protest at the publisher's revenue-maximizing "mainstreaming" strategy that marginalized its critical feminist orientation.²⁹ This has prompted criticism of the impact upon scholars reliant upon GWO (or its challenger) as their preferred publication outlet (Tekeste and Özbilgin, 2025) in advance of the announcement of GWO editors' establishment of the journal *Feminism and Organization* to be published by Bristol University Press.

Conclusion

The intent of this *Speaking Out* has been to contribute to "critical reflection" on publication ethics, and thereby stimulate and steer *praxis* consistent with safeguarding scientific knowledge evaluation. With regard to complaints, for example, editors committed to improving their evaluation processes could, at least, include in their rejection letters an explicit statement of how to complain or appeal if the author(s) suspects a breach of publication ethics; editors could also pressure publishers to instigate a genuinely independent process of adjudication over complaints; by encouraging, or requiring, reviewers to sign their reports, evaluations could be made more transparent and accountable to authors; and, finally, editors could require the identification of the action editor responsible for accepted manuscripts.

Transparency and accountability can be increased by sharing anonymized communications between editors, reviewers and authors after manuscripts have been published, thereby allowing their ethical evaluation to be "seen to be done," or not. Undeclared COIs can then be exposed. A further benefit of such openness is the sharing of "good" evaluative work that presently goes uncelebrated. When "bad" practice comes to light, remedial action may include dedication of increased resources to: the key process of selecting editors; more adequately supporting editorial work; enabling the most appropriate reviewers to be identified; and devoting more time to careful evaluation of reviewer reports (and expending less time and effort on promotional activities favored by publishers). Procedures for raising concerns about manuscript evaluation could also be set out more clearly, and handled more proficiently, enabling problems to be found and corrective actions taken. Editors could give a higher priority to welcoming and handling complaints and appeals; and editorial board members could lobby to make reforms, including the appointment of an independent Ombudsman to assess such appeals.

These modest proposals for strengthening manuscript evaluation processes should be readily fundable by publishers, given the very substantial revenues accruing to them from the largely unpaid³⁰ work of academics that fills their (not our) journals. Indeed, Bal et al. (2025 :273), following Horkheimer, have characterized such arrangements as a "racket." The *raison d'être* of commercial publishers—who now own most of the journals in the management and business domain—is to benefit shareholders and executives (Harvie et al., 2012, 2013). They therefore have little immediate incentive to strengthen the evaluation processes that provide the warrant for scientific knowledge (Beverungen et al., 2012) even though, ultimately, the monetization of scientific knowledge depends upon avoiding debasement of the coinage. Except perhaps in moments of crisis affecting the reputation of a flagship journal, is it unlikely that, without pressures from editors, publishers will proactively devote substantial resources to improving processes of manuscript evaluation. At most, it can be expected that publishers will favor low-cost ways of smoothing and speeding the organization of peer review³¹—for example, by pressurizing editorial teams to deliver KPIs (e.g. income from Article Processing Charges, open access penetration, cost per article, library renewal rates) or addressing the shortage of willing, experienced reviewers by forming reviewer pools of often precariously employed, pressurized and pliable early career researchers.

Critical scrutiny of processes of editing and reviewing raises awareness of their oppressive effects. When reflecting more generally on how to counteract oppressive and/or exploitative

conditions—in the present case, those preserved by opacity and lack of accountability—Freire (2012 :65) advises that is required. It is through collective struggles to change “anti-dialogical” practices that people, including producers and evaluators of scientific knowledge, “begin to believe in themselves,” rather than submit to what others prefer them/us to be. “Organized struggle” may also, however, result in some adverse outcomes as the mass resignation at GWO without establishing a rival journal has shown (Tekeste and Özbilgin, 2025). Critical reflection, Freire (2012 :65) further counsels, must be on-going if proposed antidotes are to be effectively applied, as *praxis*.

It is salient to remember that academic publishing is accomplished within an asymmetrical but not zero-sum structure of power relations. Publishers (and, ultimately, their shareholders) and editors are dependent upon academics, the human geese, who produce the golden shareholder returns in the region of 30%–40%. As authors, we need not act like gagging geese or obsequious hired hands (Khurana, 2007). Comparatively inexpensive measures that can be initiated by “us,” the knowledge producers, include establishing challenger “self-managed” journals, such as *Tamara*, *Ephemera* and *M@n@gement*, or moving entire editorial boards to form challenger journals. Pursuing such possibilities reduces commercial pressures and facilitates scholarly priorities but the risk of abuses of publication ethics endures so long as peer review remains shrouded in secrecy that denies accountability.

The personal and political challenge is to “develop caring relationships that work through [our feelings of] discomfort and fear” (Naya et al., 2024: 404) about, for example, being held accountable for our editorial and reviewing practices. A very small, but not insignificant, step is for reviewers to sign their reports, as taken by one of the reviewers of this *Speaking Out*. Signing reviewer reports contributes directly to disrupting the entrenched opacity and non-accountability of the manuscript evaluation process. Enabled by the discipline of “the dispossession of oneself” (Diprose, 2002:4), such “discomforting” work encompasses, yet only begins with, “speaking out” to recall the importance, fortify the application, and check the abuse, of publication ethics.

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Notes

1. See <https://publicationethics.org/guidance/guideline/ethical-guidelines-peer-reviewers>. Accessed 12 April 2025.
2. Typically, editors are not blinded although this—triple blinding—is not particularly difficult to accomplish.
3. See, for example, <https://universityaffairs.ca/opinion/failure-to-cope/>. Accessed December 11 2025.
4. *Publons* is an opportunistic response to the lack of recognition of the work of reviewing, and the associated difficulty of attracting sufficient qualified peer reviewers. See <https://webofscience.help.clarivate.com/Content/publons.html>. Integrated into Clarivate’s Web of Science, the *Publons* business model harvests and monetizes the data collected from its peer review tracking by selling subscriptions and services to publishers, institutions, and research evaluators. For background to *Publons*, see <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/business/kiwi-research-start-up-sold-to-clarivate-analytics/JYRXT755ZGAWMSGJDRFMGQM27E/> and https://figshare.com/articles/journal_contribution/The_Future_of_Academic_Research/871466?file=130733. Accessed 1 November 2024.
5. This conception of moral order is adapted from an AI generated definition. See <https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-d&channel=entpr&q=moral±order±definition>. Accessed 11 April 2015.
6. See, for example, the contested case of fabrication by Harvard Business School’s Professor Francesca Gino <https://datacolada.org/118>. Accessed 28 October 2024.

7. See <https://retractionwatch.com/2025/12/17/business-journals-scholars-relationships-elite-cohort-scholars-editors/>. Accessed 28 December 2025.
8. See previous note.
9. See <https://retractionwatch.com/2026/01/08/finance-professor-brian-lucey-ireland-elsevier-journals-retractions/>. Accessed 13 January 2026.
10. See <https://aom.org/about-aom/ethics/code-of-ethics>. Accessed 17 October 2024.
11. See http://publicationethics.org/files/Code_of_conduct_for_journal_editors_0.pdf. Accessed 24 September 2024. This was taken down sometime before 17 October 2024. The explanation provided by COPE can be found at <https://publicationethics.org/background-why-code-conduct-journal-editors-has-been-replaced-core-practices>. The original document has been replaced by a much shorter one, entitled “Core Practices.” It is explained that “The choice of the name is deliberate. The phrase “Code of Conduct” was misinterpreted as being quasi legal, which is considered inappropriate given COPE’s role as a membership organization with no statutory or regulatory powers. COPE’s intention is to advise on what the expectations are of core practices for all journals, editors and publishers to work toward, with the aim of building a set of professional practices, not just for members of COPE.” See <https://publicationethics.org/background-why-code-conduct-journal-editors-has-been-replaced-core-practices>. Accessed 16 April 2025.
12. The term “gold standard” is defined as “something of the highest quality which serves as a point of reference against which other things of its type may be compared; a measure, standard, or criterion of excellence” (OED). It is used to differentiate peer review from other, lesser forms of evaluation that do not necessarily rely upon evaluators with equivalent expertise.
13. For example, Corrigendum to Courpasson et al. (2021).
14. For example, Tsui et al. (2014).
15. *Springer Nature* is a rule-proving exception.
16. I am grateful to a reviewer for bringing this example to my attention.
17. See <https://pubpeer.com/publications/1E79BA4AA94EB722491B14AE871B0F#>. Accessed 13 April 2025.
18. For example, Ulrich Lichtenthaler had publications retracted from *Strategic Management Journal* and *Academy of Management Journal* amongst many others. In the latter case, it took 10 years to retract the paper. See <https://retractionwatch.com/category/by-author/ulrich-lichtenthaler/>. Accessed 13 April 2025.
19. Based upon research by the author.
20. For example, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10551-010-0471-8>. Accessed 16 April 2025.
21. This phrase is drawn from trials of the Inquisition where divine intervention was expected to save the innocent from severe burns. In the present case, if no transgression has occurred, editors and publishers have nothing to fear. If a transgression is discovered, there is an opportunity to learn from, and seek a remedy for, evaluation breakdowns.
22. <https://publicationethics.org/about/what-we-do>. Accessed 11 April 2025.
23. See <https://drpeterwilmschurst.wordpress.com/2022/11/15/has-cope-membership-become-a-way-for-unprincipled-journals-to-buy-a-fake-badge-of-integrity/>. Accessed 16 April 2025.
24. For a concise overview of open review, see <https://www.surrey.ac.uk/library/open-research/open-peer-review>. Accessed 11 October 2024.
25. See <https://www.bmj.com/about-bmj/resources-reviewers>. Accessed 6 November 2024.
26. See <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/neuroimage-elsevier-editorial-board-journal-profit/>. Accessed 7 November 2024.
27. See <https://www.openlibhums.org/news/875/>. Accessed 13 January 2026.
28. See <https://www.openlibhums.org>. Accessed 22 December 2025.
29. See also <https://www.ft.com/content/60370640-f464-4330-8579-a9de637a6228>. Accessed 16 April 2025.
30. “Unpaid” in the sense that it is provided by the public and private funders of higher education and other research institutions.
31. See https://www.elsevier.com/connect/an-innovative-way-to-broaden-the-reviewer-pool?utm_campaign=STMJ_134728_EDIT_UP&utm_medium=email&utm_acid=81585706&SIS_

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