

# Fire of the Week: Maintaining Editorial Independence

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There is little else in scholarly publishing as sacrosanct as the idea of editorial independence. Put simply, this concept guarantees that the editor-in-chief alone, and not the publisher, decides what the journal will publish.<sup>1</sup> Editorial independence ensures transparency in decision making and allows the journal freedom to decide to publish what they believe to be most useful to their field, and not what the owners of the journal are directing them to publish. In the case of society-owned journals, it prevents the journal from becoming the de facto mouthpiece of the society.

But what happens when that independence is threatened? As journal editors, we understand the divide between ourselves and, for example, our society's board of directors, but the reverse is not always true. It may fall to us at times to educate others when their requests of the journal overstep the boundary. It may mean stressing to our editor-in-chief that it is important to maintain a good relationship with the board of directors. It may also mean gently explaining to the board that they cannot dictate what the journal publishes. It can be a tricky situation to navigate judiciously.

In this installment of Fire of the Week, we will hear about a situation in which editorial independence was threatened, and how the editor worked to preserve the independence of a journal from its society board of directors. The situation has been kept anonymous, which is why no names are shared.

## Describe the "fire." Why was the situation unique or challenging?

We have a new editor-in-chief who, by his second month in this role, already had some interpersonal conflict with the society's CEO and board of directors' leadership. The editor was unhappy about a decision the board made regarding one of the society's journals, and he planned to announce this decision to the readership via an editorial. While the CEO and board expected the editor to be supportive of the



decision, the editor saw his announcement as an opportunity to voice his strong opinion against the decision. The CEO and board interpreted this as the new editor not being "on the same team" as society leadership and wanted the editor's messaging to support their decision.

The editor wrote an editorial that started off with criticism of the board's decision, then transitioned to a message of acceptance of the decision and a call for ideas to move forward in a new direction. Staff, who by this point had been trying to mitigate conflict between a vocal and very unhappy group of editors and the board and senior leadership over this decision for several weeks, was asked to share an early draft of the editorial with the CEO and president for their review.

## Where did you go/what resources did you utilize to arrive at a solution?

Knowing that it includes advice on editorial independence, I immediately searched the Council of Science Editor's (CSE) White Paper on Publication Ethics, section 2.5, "Relations between Editors and Publishers, Sponsoring Societies, or Journal Owners."<sup>2</sup> As recommended in this section, our journals publish a "disclaimer indicating that material published in the journal does not represent the opinion of the publisher, sponsoring society, or journal owner"<sup>3</sup> in every issue's masthead. Sensing that society leadership wanted to step in and overrule what the editor might say in his announcement editorial, I reiterated to my supervisor, the CEO, and the president that we have a policy of editorial independence, and sent them the relevant text from the White Paper. I also sought advice via the CSE listserv and received some good input.

## How did you resolve the problem? What was the outcome?

Once I had the draft editorial in hand, I suggested some edits to the editor to soften the language in a few places

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where I anticipated society leadership would take issue. I explained my reasoning for each edit, reminding the editor that he did not have to accept my changes because he has editorial independence from the society. Especially with him being new in the editor-in-chief role, it was important for me to build trust with him and remain as neutral as possible while also trying to ameliorate the conflict. As a new editor, this was a situation he had not encountered before, so it fell to me to coach him in that delicate balance of maintaining a good relationship with the board while remaining editorially independent.

He accepted my edits except for one opinion sentence. The sentence was a bit harshly worded for the society staff and did not represent our view, but we were satisfied that the editor compromised and felt it critical to allow him to state his opinion.

I passed along a final draft (post-edits) to the CEO and president, who then called a private meeting with the editor. I again asked the CEO and president not to request any changes to the editorial, warning that doing so would violate editorial independence, which would reflect poorly on the society and damage the journal's reputation. Prudently, they agreed. The president rushed to post a preemptory announcement to the membership, so the society's official message would be public before the objectionable editorial. The editorial then published without much fanfare.

Unfortunately, the following month, a scientific editor reiterated the same opinion in another editorial in a sister journal. Staff had concerns but published it, too, this time without opposition from senior leadership.

### **What other possibilities did you consider? Why did you decide against those?**

There weren't viable alternate options; we must uphold the principle of editorial independence. The integrity of a journal is based on the intellectual exchange between authors and readers, orchestrated by editors without pressure or influence from the journal's owners. Allowing the board to interfere with the workings of the journal would prevent the journal from being perceived as unbiased.

We did consider adding a disclaimer alongside the editorial stating that the editor's view is not necessarily the view of the society but ultimately felt that would draw more unwanted attention to the conflict between this group of

editors and society leadership, and so decided against it. We felt that our standard catch-all disclaimer in every issue's masthead was sufficient.

### **Will you change any of your policies or day-to-day procedures based on this occurrence?**

I think the Board realized that they should have communicated their controversial decision earlier, more clearly, and directly with stakeholders, which would have softened the blow and potentially avoided conflicts and months of repeated flare-ups of this fire. If a similar situation were to happen in the future, I would be more vocal in pushing for board leadership to talk directly to stakeholders instead of leaving staff to break bad news to the (member, volunteer) editorial board.

### **Do you have advice for others facing the same situation?**

Rely on published best practice resources such as CSE's White Paper, the Committee on Publication Ethics, and others to aid your decisions and bolster your arguments to your superiors when conflicts like this arise. Often, senior society leadership is not familiar with the nuances of scholarly publishing ethics, so it's important to be well versed in guidelines from recognized expert organizations. Educate them, link to relevant resources, make them understand why the journal's reputation stands on following those best practices, and if necessary, stand between the editor and society leadership to protect editorial independence, uncomfortable as it may be.

### **References and Links**

1. Michael A. Ask the chefs: what is editorial independence and how does it impact publishing? The Scholarly Kitchen. April 30, 2015. [accessed May 2, 2021]. <https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2015/04/30/ask-the-chefs-what-is-editorial-independence-and-how-does-it-impact-publishing/>
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3. Council of Science Editors, Editorial Policy Committee. CSE's white paper on promoting integrity in scientific journal publications. 2018. [accessed May 2, 2021]. <https://www.councilscienceeditors.org/resource-library/editorial-policies/white-paper-on-publication-ethics/>