Dr Sabina Alam: Shaping Critical Thinking About Science

Anna Jester

As Director of Publishing Ethics and Integrity at Taylor & Francis Group, Sabina Alam provides support and guidance for more than 2,500 journals covering the scientific, technical, and medical (STM) disciplines, as well as the humanities and social sciences. Given the mix of different topics and issues that can arise in a broad portfolio of journals, the challenge of Sabina's position is to think broadly about how integrity of published content is established and how this can be communicated to authors, editors, and readers. *Science Editor*'s Anna Jester recently spoke with Sabina about trustworthiness in peer review, her path toward scholarly publishing, important scholarly publishing developments, and why examining policies and procedures is vital.

Science Editor: Is the job of Director of Publishing Ethics and Integrity one that's been around for a while in your organization or is it a newer position?

Dr Sabina Alam: Taylor & Francis launched their Research Integrity and Ethics Team in 2017. I was not there at the time, but it entailed Research Integrity Managers working with editorial teams to resolve ethics and integrity cases as needed (e.g., dealing with authorship disputes, plagiarism, image integrity concerns, etc). Within a short time, though, ethics cases grew in volume as well as complexity, and in 2019, Taylor & Francis realized someone was needed at the Director level, so I stepped into the position to lead the team in driving and enhancing the ethics function for the journals published by the organization. This involves refining our editorial policies, developing and providing training for colleagues as well as editors, working with colleagues in operational, peer review, and production functions to improve our processes and checks, and to take proactive measures to respond to challenges presented by the evolving research and publishing landscape. I tend to describe what we do in three arms: reactive (case management and resolution), proactive/preventative (policy setting/refinement, training, improved processes for checks, verification, etc), and transparency/public information (improved consistency of ethics statements in papers, data sharing considerations, etc).

Science Editor: How did you end up in scientific publishing?

Dr Alam: In 2008, I was a researcher in neuroscience, deciding what my next steps would be as my postdoctoral contract was finishing. The most obvious thing to do was to apply for another postdoc position, but I felt the need to broaden my horizons and thought giving publishing a go would be worthwhile. I don't know specifically what compelled me to do it. I didn't know anyone in publishing but was driven by my experience as an early career researcher, where although publication of research in journals is an integral part of the profession, in my experience, it wasn't a particularly transparent process. For example, how does the editor make decisions, and who are the peer reviewers? So, I thought it was something worth learning more about.

Almost on a whim, I applied for a position at BioMed Central, an open access publisher, and they invited me over for an interview as an assistant editor. During the interview process, they explained the position involved assessing papers, understanding the peer review process, and being

ANNA JESTER is Vice President of Sales & Marketing at eJournalPress.

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involved in inviting appropriate peer reviewers to help ensure worthy papers were published. This interested me and they offered me the position. However, going from a 4-year postdoc level position to an entry level assistant editor position involved a huge pay cut and required a significant lifestyle change. I was hungry to learn and didn't have any dependents or a mortgage at the time, so decided to go for it (against the advice of my family!). I intended it to be like an internship that I would do for 6 months before returning to the lab to complete another postdoc project.

However, once I started working on journals at BioMed Central, I got absolutely hooked. It was so different to being in the lab, where for so many years I was laser-focused on a specific family of neuroreceptors and its signaling mechanisms, etc. By contrast, once I was working on journals, I was introduced to a wide variety of research topics across STM—and I really loved this. I felt it was shaping my own critical thinking about science and different study designs and felt there was much to be gained in developing this knowledge, and so I stayed. I continued down that path and even edited *BMC Medicine*, a flagship medical journal, for 5 years. When handling content, we were very focused on working with peer reviewers and the editorial board to ensure that novelty and exciting findings were not the only factors that drove editorial decisions, that limitations of the study were stated and considered, that impact (and generalizability) of the study was clear, that methodology and analysis was clearly reported, and of course, that the ethics of the research had been checked and verified. Working with authors from all over the world, I became increasingly interested in the research ethics and publishing ethics aspects, because I grew to understand how much standards and guidelines can vary in different settings as well as in different disciplines.

Eventually, I left BioMed Central for F1000, where I joined as Editorial Director. I made that move because I was interested in a whole new way of publishing. The F1000 model is such that they publish first (open access) and then conduct peer review, in a completely open and transparent way. The content can be updated as a different version when needed, and authors and reviewers have direct interactions with each other on the platform. They really help drive the Open Science agenda because the model runs on the principles of speed and transparency—open peer review, open data, open commenting, versioning of content (i.e., "living" articles), etc. What I loved about working with content on this model is that it was necessary to think outside the box, especially when it came to certain ethics issues, and so this continued my foray into that side of things. It led me to where I am now at Taylor & Francis, working with colleagues to ensure the integrity of content and what we need to do as publishers to support researchers, disseminate verified and trustworthy content, and how we apply standards and processes to prove that. Perhaps a convoluted journey, but an interesting one for me.

Science Editor: What do you enjoy most about your career and what challenges do you face?

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Dr Alam: I most enjoy the impact it has. It is an important responsibility to work with researchers to scrutinize, validate, publish, and disseminate research findings; to ensure accuracy and discoverability; and simultaneously make certain the science is understandable and can be built upon for further research and to improve ways to give credit where it's due (e.g., authorship contributions and peer reviewers).

We have a responsibility regarding these challenges, and keeping pace with evolving research and methodologies is part of recognizing how research continues to become more global and diverse. We must understand different standards and settings and how they inform due diligence checks.

Unfortunately, we do have to deal with deliberate manipulation of the publishing process (e.g., fraudulent contributions and fake or manipulated data), and some of it is large-scale, such as paper mills whose only motivation to publish is financial, that is, a business set up to create papers using fake data and sold to researchers desperate to publish in journals. Stopping this type of content from polluting the scholarly record is a top priority for us!

Science Editor: What skills, abilities, and personal attributes have you found to be essential in your current work?

Dr Alam: Curiosity and a hunger for knowledge. Much of what my team does is based on what we don't know, what we need to understand better, and finding out what policies and guidance journals and authors need. I'll often join different collaborations or working groups, talk to lots of different kinds of people, and ask lots of questions because I learn so much and broaden my perspective and understanding this way. To do my job well, I think it's incredibly important to avoid tunnel vision; to be aware of the challenges authors, reviewers, and editors face; and learn how we can address these, making it better for all.

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Science Editor: Can you tell us about your recent work regarding the process at Taylor & Francis, and perhaps other organizations with which you volunteer, specific to name changes and the policies surrounding them?

Dr Alam: Taylor & Francis participated in various discussions, spurred in some ways by the Committee on Publication Ethics[1] (COPE), as well as author queries, about the need for a better way of updating author names on papers that did not involve publishing a separate correction notice. We were being contacted by authors from the transgender community requesting us to replace their previous name with their new name on their published articles and presented compelling arguments for why they needed to do it without an associated correction notice. They've made such a big change in their lives, but they don't necessarily want that part of their personal history to be a permanent part of their published academic record, or to end up having a split published record between their previous name and new name. As we became increasingly involved in these discussions with authors, colleagues, and COPE, we realized that our authorship name change policy and process was outdated and needed to be reassessed. We had various conversations with authors to gain insight regarding the challenges they faced with this issue. It forced us to take a step back and examine why we had the current correction policy for author name changes, and if we were to change it, how we could do so without affecting the integrity of authorship. We realized our process created unnecessary barriers for people who change their name for all sorts of reasons (e.g., new identity, marriage, divorce, etc.) and that we were causing authors to have broken publication records for no good reason. We revisited our policy and determined a name change would be treated as a minor revision, which doesn't require a correction notice.

The author is still identifiable, contactable, and accountable for the content of their article. Our legal team advised that the author publishing agreements originally signed are still valid, so we don't need an updated version of the agreement. We also had discussions with our tech team, asking if we went forward with retrospective name changes, how we could also update indexes so that the information comes through. This was incredibly important to authors that came to us requesting a name change.

In our discussion with authors, we have to be very clear about what we can do and what we can't currently do or guarantee. For example, we will change the name without an associated correction notice, and will transmit this update to indexers, but can't guarantee when they will update their records. We also ask the author to take some actions—for example, if they had coauthors, we ask them to inform those coauthors, especially if the person changing their name is a corresponding author. We suggest they also inform the institution affiliated with the paper, which likely tracks papers published by their researchers. Ideally, whomever needs to be informed should be, while simultaneously respecting the need for privacy and sensitivity. We have made this our default process, so if any author changes their name for any reason, this is done without publishing a correction notice, unless they specifically request one. To improve the process at a wider scale, there is now a NISO working group[2] collaborating with different stakeholders to develop recommended practices.

Our author name change policy serves as an example of why taking a fresh look at policies and procedures is vital. Do we believe we are doing things the right way, for the right reasons? Should we reassess long-standing policies? Since launching our policy, we have been receiving a steady stream of requests from authors, and it's very satisfying to be able to accommodate their needs in a way that is straightforward and does not compromise the integrity of authorship.

Science Editor: What's next on your horizon in terms of topics which may receive this type of review and refresh?

Dr Alam: One project I am currently involved with that may make a big difference immediately is the Peer Review Taxonomy project, which originated as a working group for the STM project[3] led by Joris van Rossum. The project is taking a fresh look at peer-review terminologies. It is not about whether a journal should implement open peer review, single-anonymous, double-anonymous, or other models of peer review. Instead, the project aims to clarify whether we all mean the same thing when we say "peer review," and then, are we in agreement about what the various peer-review terms, like open or double-anonymous peer review, mean? Something that came out early on was that we should stop calling peer review "blind," in favor of "anonymous." The project has been very beneficial because several publishers and journals are involved. I've been representing Taylor & Francis, and we've been working on the terminology but also the level of information we should strive to give to readers.

There are a handful of different elements. One is the peer-review model, meaning does the journal use single-anonymous, open, etc. Because "open" can be used in so many ways, we break it down by levels of interaction, defining which open elements are in use. If a reviewer interacts with only the editor, that is single- or double-anonymous peer review. If the reviewer interacts with the editor and other reviewers, or the authors, we want to be able to capture that and classify it accordingly. Additionally, does the journal provide any information to readers? Some journals publish the editor's decision letter, including reviewer comments in an anonymized format, and we should be specific about that

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as well. We don't tell journals what model to use, or whether peer-review comments should be published, but having a level of transparency is helpful. We've been piloting it at Taylor & Francis (as have several other publishers), and there is now a working group with NISO[4] to improve standardization across the industry.

Another important working group I have been involved with is the Text Recycling Research Project[5] led by Cary Moskovitz, Michael Pemberton, and Susanne Hall. It is a wonderful project because it really addresses the simultaneously vague and complex questions defining text recycling, noting how it differs from salami slicing, and providing guidance of when it is appropriate and inappropriate. Guidance[6] has also been developed for editors and researchers regarding text recycling, and I strongly believe this will make a great impact in addressing an area of common concern and confusion.

Science Editor: What is one thing about you that might surprise our readers?

Dr Alam: As a teenager growing up in Bangladesh, I started to write poems. One day, on a whim and without discussing with my parents, I submitted one to a local newspaper which published it and invited me to send in a series of poems over a few years that were published in their weekend edition every Friday. When my parents found out, they mentioned I should get something for doing this work, and so every time one of my poems got published my parents rewarded me with some pocket money to spend on anything I liked (it would usually be spent on a cassette by some pop or rock artist!) Perhaps it is most interesting that I went into science instead of literature?

References and Links

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