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# Ethical Issues Faced by Editors and Reviewers

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**ABSTRACT** This essay discusses the sundry ethical considerations confronting editors and reviewers. To begin, journal hierarchy and manuscript lifecycles are reviewed. From there, ethical issues faced by individuals in various editorial roles, who interact with various parties, are discussed. Issues include making fair desk rejections, assigning reviewers ethically, refraining from the promotion of HARKing (hypothesizing after results are known), promoting a holistic view of validity, balancing scientific progress with journal success, providing developmental and actionable feedback, disclosing expertise parameters, and upholding the spirit of double-blind review.

**KEYWORDS** editors, ethics, journals, publishing, reviewing, reviewers

## INTRODUCTION

The field of management represents an interesting 'discipline' in that it represents the study of people, groups, organizations, networks, and complex systems within public and private sectors. Such a broad scholarly approach requires the perspectives and methodologies of many traditional disciplines, such as sociology, psychology, economics, and the like. With different approaches, perspectives, and methods come varying normative standards involving the flow, dissemination, and evaluation of new knowledge. Interestingly, with varying normative standards involving research practice, so too come varying perceptions of research ethics. Such a situation makes it doubly important that the field agrees upon a set of ethical considerations to govern research practices, including the reviewing and editing of manuscripts.

The field is not completely lacking guidance within this domain. There have been scholarly papers written on research ethics (e.g., von Glinow & Novelli, 1982), and the Academy of Management (2006) has published a code of ethics that provides broad goals for authors, reviewers, and editors for ensuring responsible and ethical practices. The International Association for Chinese Management Research (2011) has a 'Commitment to Excellence' statement that spells out a similar set of guidelines to ensure ethical conduct by researchers. We also have

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professional standards and codes of conduct governing many of the disciplinary foundations and topical areas of management (American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & American Council on Measurement in Education, 1999; American Sociological Association, 1999; Committee on Science, Engineering, and Public Policy, 1995; International Task Force on Assessment Center Guidelines, 2009). However, in general, our field lacks detailed discussions of the complex ethical dilemmas that various parties involved in the research process might find themselves in (Lowman, 2006). Thus, given the network of relationships that the publication process involves, the articles comprising this special issue are important as a set. In this article, editor and reviewer ethics will be discussed. Although the focus is limited to these parties, because ethical responsibilities often involve reciprocal processes, ethical considerations for authors, publishers, and other stakeholder groups will also be implied.

## IDENTIFYING POINTS OF INFERENCE: JOURNAL ROLES AND MANUSCRIPT DECISION POINTS

Because the roles of reviewers and editors may be less familiar to some of our readers, as a starting point, it may be useful to briefly discuss the editorial process and norms of practice within our field. This is because it is essential to understand the life cycle of a manuscript (as well as the organizational structure of most journals) in order to identify areas where ethical questions often arise.

### Journal Structure and Roles

The top level of most journals is either the *editor-in-chief*, or a small number of senior editors (for consistency the term editor will be used to demark this level). The editor is responsible for selecting associate editors, board members, and ad hoc reviewers, as well as keeping the journal, its scope, and its standards visible to the field. The editor also manages the journal's budget, and runs the journal office, which is typically staffed with a managing editor and an editorial assistant. Most journals are now owned by either a professional association, a publishing company (public or private), or both, and as such, an editor typically has multiple reporting lines and stakeholder groups to which he or she is accountable.

The editor and his or her administrative staff is the first point of contact for all submitted manuscripts. This person first decides if each manuscript is suitable for the journal (he or she may 'desk reject' the paper at that point), and if deemed suitable, decides who the action editor will be for each manuscript (which could either be him/herself or one of the associate editors). At this point, the editor may also assign reviewers to the manuscript (sometimes this is carried out by the action editor).

The second level of leadership at a journal consists of the *associate editors* (referred to as senior editors or department editors by some journals). These individuals may

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assign reviewers, and are solely responsible for synthesizing the information provided in reviewer reports and making decisions on manuscripts on behalf of the journal. Thus, action editors (i.e., editors assigned to particular manuscripts, who could be either the editor or an associate editor) are the conduit of feedback to authors on the quality and suitability of their submitted research.

Journals rely on their *editorial board members* (sometimes called consulting editors) to be their pool of expert reviewers. The board is typically the first stop for editors or associate editors when assigning reviewers to manuscripts. If there are not strong candidates among the board for a particular manuscript (or if the most fitting board members already have a full load), then *ad hoc reviewers* (other scholars in the field, not currently on the board, with expertise on the topic area of the manuscript) will be invited. From here on, these individuals, collectively, will be referred to as *reviewers*. It is the responsibility of reviewers to read the manuscripts assigned to them and provide to the editor ratings, as well as a narrative report outlining strengths, weaknesses, and developmental recommendations. In the major journals of our field, a double-blind review process is used, where the authors' identity is concealed from the reviewers (but not from the editor), and the reviewers' identity (but not the editor's identity) is concealed from the authors. Reviewers also often have the option of presenting comments to the editor only, which are concealed from the authors, and not included in the reviewer reports. The objective ratings reviewers make are also often only available to the editor.

The journal representatives are also often rated on their performance regarding each manuscript. Action editors rate reviewers and editors rate action editors. Thus, there are many checks and balances, and both quantitative and qualitative data are collected at many points, on all parties involved in the process.

## The Lifecycle of a Manuscript

Many decisions are made during a submitted manuscript's lifecycle. Thus, for a full discussion of reviewer and editor ethics, it is important that these decision points are identified. As mentioned above, once a manuscript is submitted and found to meet basic submission requirements, it goes to the editor for review consideration. Among the top journals, 25–30 percent of submissions are rejected at this stage and not sent out for review (i.e., 'desk rejected') because of their lack of fit with the scope of the journal or clear unacceptability given the journal's standards. Manuscripts passing this hurdle are then assigned an action editor, and either the editor or the action editor (who could be one in the same) invites reviewers. Once the reviewers agree to review, they are expected to submit the ratings and reports within a specified period of time. Once all reviews are received, the manuscript, with the ratings, comments, and reviewer reports, goes back to the action editor who reads the manuscript, supporting materials, and all information submitted from

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reviewers. The action editor then makes a decision, which is summarized and detailed in a letter to the authors. The decision points at this stage are typically (in order of frequency) 'reject', 'high-risk revise and resubmit', 'revise and encourage resubmission', 'conditionally accept', or 'accept' as is. Other disciplines also have a 'reject and resubmit' category, which is beginning to become more commonplace within management as well. Any resubmissions are handled using the same processes. The same – and occasionally additional new reviewers – are assigned to review the revised manuscript. This process continues until a paper is ultimately accepted or rejected. Among the top journals, acceptance rates are around 10 percent (which includes desk rejects).

## ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITIES OF EDITORS

Some general ethical guidelines for editors already exist. For example, the Academy of Management's (2006: section 4.2.4) code of ethics list the following as editors' ethical responsibilities:

- Be fair in the application of academic publishing standards, and operate without personal or ideological favouritism or malice. Be cognizant of any potential conflicts of interest.
- Ensure the confidentiality of the review process and supervise editorial office staff, including students, in accordance with practices that maintain confidentiality.
- Publish all manuscripts accepted for publication unless major errors or ethical violations are discovered after acceptance (e.g., plagiarism or scientific misconduct).
- Ensure the anonymity of reviewers unless they receive permission from reviewers to reveal their identities. Ensure that staff members conform to this practice.
- Ensure the anonymity of authors unless and until a manuscript is accepted for publication, or unless the established practices of the journal are known to be otherwise.
- Take steps to provide for the timely review of all manuscripts and respond promptly to inquiries about the status of a review.

The publishing of this ethics code marks an important point in the field's development and these guidelines cover the broad spectrum of responsibilities and potential ethical dilemmas that editors might face. Because ethics codes are necessarily broad in their recommendations, for this paper, a discussion of more specific issues, to compliment these broad categories, might be helpful. This is certainly not an exhaustive list of issues, but rather represents a sample of areas that most editors are quite familiar with.

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## The Fairness of Desk Rejections

One issue that can at times place editors in a moral quandary involves the process of desk rejecting manuscripts. The number of authors, manuscripts, journals, and nations contributing to the scholarly pool increases every year. As of this writing, the top journals are each receiving approximately 1,000 submissions per year. Journals may have around five to fifteen associate editors and a pool of board members and ad hoc reviewers. These individuals comprise a volunteer army of scholars who have to balance their journal reviewing with their own scholarly work, teaching, and university service. Thus, based on numbers alone, it behoves editors to make sure manuscripts sent out for review have some reasonable chance of success in the process. Failing to do so could easily overtax associate editors and reviewers. Further, there are papers that are submitted to journals that in no way fit with the journal's scope and/or contain clearly flawed applications of theory and/or methodologies. Rejecting these papers straight away is, in some ways, an act of fairness to the editorial team – action editors' and reviewers' time is not well spent writing reports on manuscripts that are clearly not suitable for the journal. In other ways, this is an act of fairness to the authors. Rather than having their paper tied up under review only to have it ultimately rejected, they are instead given very rapid feedback that they can use to immediately begin improving their work.

But despite the fair practices that a desk-reject policy is designed to support, there exist ethical issues that editors have to consider when implementing such practices. It is, of course, of great importance that desk rejects are only carried out when there is no question of the suitability of the manuscript for the journal. The editor is the only person to see the manuscript in this case, and in some ways, the argument could be made that authors do not receive a fair chance by not having their paper sent out for review. Of course, it is also the editors' ethical responsibility to refrain from allowing their own opinion of the research topic's importance, their view of the authors' past work, or any personal issues to interfere with this very delicate decision. I have spoken to many editors about this issue, and it seems clear that the current practice among the top journals is one of 'when in doubt, send out for review'. Although reviewers can often become frustrated when they have to review low quality papers, fair treatment of authors takes precedence, and thus editors often find themselves in positions of easing tensions between the two groups they serve (authors and reviewers).

## Assigning Reviewers Ethically

Another ethical responsibility of editors involves the assigning of reviewers. Technology has created large efficiencies here, as computerized editorial systems allow editors to search for reviewers in their databases according to their expertise, experience with the journal, review quality, and timeliness. Thus, matching manu-

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scripts with good reviewers is much easier than it has been in the past. But despite these efficiencies, the assigning of reviewers still involves a certain amount of subjectivity, and as any researcher knows, the composition of reviewers has at least a non-negligible impact on the nature of the issues informing the decision.[1] For this reason, it is the ethical responsibility of editors to assign reviewers that represent expertise and balanced perspectives, never attempting to pre-influence ratings either against or in favour of a particular manuscript or set of authors.

Further, editors must also be sensitive to potential direct or indirect influence of authors. That is, authors might cite a potential reviewer a disproportionate amount in hopes of their being assigned the manuscript (see Chen, 2011). Some authors might even request certain reviewers in their cover letters to the editor. Whereas such practices may not be inappropriate if the reasons for such influence are scholarly in nature (i.e., this person is the most qualified reviewer in the field), this practice should not be carried out because of a motivation to maximize one's chances of success. Therefore, to the best of their ability, editors have to sort out these issues, and assign reviewers that do not give some authors an unfair advantage over other authors.

## Refraining from the Promotion of HARKing

Other papers in this special issue have discussed HARKing: hypothesizing after results are known (see Leung, 2011). As has been discussed in a number of papers and texts (see, e.g., Kerr, 1998), our field largely follows a hypodeductive method for theory building and hypothesis testing.[2] Based on past theory and empirical evidence, we propose hypotheses, then collect data with which to test our predictions. On some occasions, authors may be tempted to report hypotheses in their manuscripts that represent summaries of their already-obtained sample statistics. Although a description of the complete set of reasons for why such practices are bad for scientific progress and the generation of knowledge is beyond the scope of this paper, the consequence of this practice is this: *post hoc* hypotheses presented as a priori hypotheses converts Type I errors into non-replicable theory, and hides null results from future generations of researchers. This is an unethical research practice.

Although HARKing is most often a topic in discussions of author ethics, it is also of relevance to editors and reviewers, whose job is to make recommendations to authors on how to organize their theoretical arguments and present their data. It is not unusual for reviewers to suggest alternate theories, models, or approaches to authors, given their (the reviewers') expertise and their knowledge (*post hoc*) of the original hypotheses and results. Editors therefore, in writing their decision letters, have to word their recommendations to authors in such a way that HARKing is not promoted. For example, rather than requesting that authors draw from a

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different theory, or alter their hypotheses, editors might recommend an alternative theoretical perspective and set of propositions be brought up in the discussion section, and perhaps new data collected to test *post hoc* ideas. Of course, this should also be an ethical consideration for reviewers, but because editors ultimately make the final revision recommendations and write the decision letter, editors have the final opportunity to guard against inadvertent promotion of HARKing during the review process.

## Promoting a Holistic View of Validity

Another ethical consideration for editors making decisions on empirical papers involves measurement standards and validation processes. The modern view of validation is holistic and unified (American Educational Research Association et al., 1999; Landy, 1986). That is, validity refers to the accumulated evidence about whether a measurement technique supports the inferences one wishes to draw from the results. Thus, validity does not refer to a single method or coefficient. Rather, the use of a measure must be supported by a variety of evidence supporting the conclusions an author wishes to make based on the data resulting from its use. This evidence includes: (i) the representativeness of the sample of items/stimuli to the domain of interest; (ii) relationships between scores from the measure and scores from other measures of the same and different attributes; (iii) correlations with criterion measures of important outcomes; (iv) incremental prediction of outcomes over and above variance already accounted for by other similar variables or measures; (v) comparisons between different groups of individuals on the measure; (vi) participant reactions to the measure; and (vii) unintended negative consequences of using the measure. These last two types of evidence fall within the realm of social or consequential validity (Messick, 1998, 2000; Schuler, 1993), and speak to humanistic responsibilities of researchers in ensuring that the research practices are aligned with the social good (see also Lefkowitz, 2003, 2008, 2010).

It is the ethical obligation of editors to ensure that authors uphold these standards. New measures, single-item measures, or measures that lack accumulated validity evidence do not allow for inferential confidence. The protection of the rights of research subjects (e.g., voluntary participation, confidentiality, proper debriefing, ethical use of data) needs to be ensured. There is a trend in management research for authors to say less and less about how data were solicited and obtained. Some authors make only cursory references to psychometric summary papers (e.g., Hinkin, 1995, 1998), rather than follow established and comprehensive methodological and measurement practices (Campbell & Fiske, 1959; Cronbach & Meehl, 1955; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994; Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002). So that the integrity and social consequences of our research is ensured, and so that we can have confidence about the conclusions we draw based on our data,

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it is the ethical responsibility of editors to uphold strict standards for the treatment of subjects and the measurement of variables, and to enforce them widely.

### Balancing Scientific Progress with Journal Success

The final issue that I have chosen to discuss within the category of editor ethics is more political in nature. It involves the competition among journals (or perhaps more accurately, competition between publishers) involving journal subscriptions, downloads, penetration in international markets, and perhaps most importantly, citation rates. On one hand, collegial competition among journals is a good thing for scientific progress. Striving to publish top-quality papers that are highly cited is an important goal, and having multiple journals with overlapping content domains creates a market for ideas, data, and cutting edge theory. However, with any market-based enterprise comes the potential for abuse. One of the most important indices for editors, publishers, and often authors who want to publish in the journals seen as high quality (for purposes of gaining promotion and tenure, or for simply landing their research in an optimally visible outlet), is the 'impact factor', which is a metric indicating the average number of times papers from a given journal are cited over a particular period of time. Impact factors are often used by disciplines, universities, and publishers to rank the prestige of journals.[3] Because of the far-reaching importance of such indices, it is necessary for editors to keep the dissemination of quality research as a main objective, and resist the various competitive pressures they may feel from publishers, professional organizations, or colleagues. Just as it is an ethical responsibility for teachers to refrain from 'teaching to the test' (i.e., plan their teaching in such ways that maximize their students' standardized test scores), so, too, should editors refrain from making any decisions that are not in the best interest of scientific progress.

## ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITIES OF REVIEWERS

Guidelines regarding the ethical conduct of reviewers also exist. For example, the Academy of Management's (2006: section 4.2.5) code of ethics list the following as reviewers' ethical responsibilities:

- In reviewing material submitted for publication, respect the confidentiality of the process and the proprietary rights of those who submitted the material.
- Disclose conflicts of interest or decline requests to review others' work when aware of conflicts of interest.
- Decline requests for reviews of the work of others when it is believed that the review process may be biased or when there are questions about the integrity of the process.

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- If asked to review a manuscript one has previously reviewed, make that prior review known to the person making the request (e.g., editor), unless it is clear that one is being asked to provide a reappraisal.

These are certainly important, agreed upon standards [note that Lee & Mitchell (2011) also add obtaining editor consent and disclosing if others (e.g., students) have been involved in carrying out the review]. However, similar to the editor ethical considerations, there are additional, specific issues relevant to the ethics of reviewing. I will discuss a sample of these below.

## Developmental Feedback vs. Non-actionable Evaluations vs. Major Reconstructive Surgery

In every journal's reviewer guidelines, reviewers are encouraged to be as constructive and detailed as possible when voicing concerns and making suggestions. Further, agreed upon ethical reviewer practices involve referencing the paper rather than the authors (so the critique is of the research, not the researchers) and providing actionable feedback. For example, in the Society of Industrial and Organizational Psychology (2011) reviewer guidelines, contrasts are given between negative and constructive reviews:

- Negative review: 'The authors did not provide a sufficient test of their hypotheses'.
- Constructive review: 'The manuscript needs to provide a stronger test of its hypotheses, for example, by conducting paired *t*-tests'.
- Negative review: 'The authors ignore the limitations of this research'.
- Constructive review: 'The manuscript needs to provide more details about the potential limitations of this research'.

Feldman (2005) discusses several ways in which reviewers may act sadistically toward both authors and editors – actions that would indeed violate what has been established as normative ethical practices within our field. This includes being preachy or pedantic in one's reviews, blocking paradigms, gate-keeping, pushing one's own research agenda, or being overly assertive or controlling during the review process. This also involves engaging in Boulwarism, or making nonnegotiable demands of authors. Doing so not only infringes on the rights of authors, but also pigeon-holes editors, who may be faced with two reviewers 'demanding' opposite actions.

There also exist more subtly (to use Feldman's words) 'sadistic' (perhaps passive-aggressive) reviewer practices as well. This might include suggesting that authors cite the reviewer's own work when it is not directly relevant to the issues at hand. Another involves the sending of mixed messages – seeming supportive in the report

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provided to the authors, but providing harsh comments and negative ratings to the editor. This again makes the editor's job much more difficult and prevents the authors from receiving the honest, potentially constructive feedback that is their right to have.

Finally, reviewers must also find that middle ground between being vaguely evaluative, and as Feldman (2005) writes, performing major reconstructive surgery. A reviewer is not an author, nor should she or he become one, and therefore authors and reviewers must uphold a contract where neither party expects too much, acts in non-conscientious ways (e.g., late revisions, late reviews), or takes advantage of another in any way.

## Know Thy Literature, Scrutinize Statistical Estimates, and Disclose Expertise Parameters

Reviewers are expected to have the necessary expertise to review manuscripts assigned to them by editors. If they do not, they should decline to review and state the reasons why. Editors often invite different individuals to review a paper for different reasons. They may invite one reviewer because of their familiarity with a relevant theory; they might invite another reviewer because of their relevant methodological expertise. Because different reviewers may serve different functions for a particular manuscript, it is necessary to state what one is able to comment on, and what one is not able to comment on, very explicitly in the reviewer report.

Often times, providing a thorough review requires reading beyond the manuscript, conducting literature searches, and at times corresponding with editors about specific concerns. In many ways, reviewers serve as the 'HARKing police'. They are expected to give a close eye to the inclusion and omission of relevant variables, the wording of hypotheses, and the nuances of reported statistical estimates. It is not uncommon for a reviewer to request that an editor take a close look at something, because the logic, data, or variables reported on do not seem to add up. Ethical, responsible reviewers have a keen eye for situations where theory seems to have been developed *post hoc* to fit the data (for more information on *post hoc* hypotheses, please see Leung, 2011 in this issue). They are also expected to be active in the research community and aware of what is being presented at conferences and published in other journals. Unfortunately, there are times when papers are sent simultaneously to different journals, and occasions when data are used in questionable ways in order to maximize publication success. These are serious, unethical acts and reviewers are responsible for reporting suspicious author behaviour to the editor. Reviewers are often editors' first line of defence against such practices, and serving the field in this way should be considered within the ethical practice of reviewing.

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### Uphold the Spirit of Double-Blind Review

An additional ethical consideration has emerged in the 21st century, as technology has allowed us to post our work on the Internet via a variety of formats. Most faculty members have university-sponsored web pages, listing their curricula vitae and professional experiences. Google Scholar continues to employ what occasionally seems like sorcery-level technology, allowing for the cataloguing of virtually every scholarly undertaking a person has ever carried out. The result of this astounding level of information accessibility is that truly blind review is becoming increasingly difficult. As this continues, it becomes an ethical duty of reviewers to refrain from any Internet detective work that might otherwise reveal the identity of authors. Double-blind review is a tenant of the scholarly process that has served science well for centuries. It would be a shame to abandon it all simply because the ability of journals to completely mask the identity of authors has decreased due to technology. This is a practice that scholars with integrity can certainly uphold. As other authors in this special issue have pointed out, authors can do their part as well by being careful about how information is presented about their work on the Internet.

What this boils down to is resisting the urge to play the author (or reviewer) guessing game and instead focusing on working together to improve research and push knowledge forward. A wise editor once told me that 90 percent of people's guesses are typically wrong, and so all activities such as these end up serving neither a political nor a scientific purpose.

## CONCLUSION

Einstein has been quoted as saying that the right to search for truth implies also a duty, and that we must not conceal any part of what has been recognized to be true. While on the surface, these words may seem appropriate for a discussion of the ethical considerations of authors, I feel such a statement is just as relevant in a discussion of editor and reviewer ethics. This is because editors and reviewers are ethically bound to focus on research, without being affected by externalities, and to uphold standards for the pure pursuit of knowledge. In serving these roles, they (we) must strive to control self-interests, and be free from competitive pressures, political agendas, and temptations to be critical in ways that are contrary to the scientific method. We have an obligation to defend research ethics, and therefore review the work of others with diligence, and take responsible actions when we detect questionable practices. We should uphold standards of measurement and validation (including social validity) and take responsibility for ensuring the ethical treatment of research participants and the honest dissemination of research findings. In communicating with one another about research, our goals for scientific progress should lead to respectful and developmental communication with one another, and

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a general concern for the fair treatment of all parties involved in the research process.

## NOTES

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[1] This statement should not be interpreted as a statement about the reliability of reviews. Although some critiques of the inter-rater reliability of reviewers have been discussed in the literature (Glick, Miller, & Cardinal, 2007), readers might want to consider an important paper by Hollenbeck and Mannor (2007) which analysed the reliability of the evaluations any single author receives over the course of his or her career, which nears 1.0 in 5 years into one's career (converging even more quickly for authors who submit more papers, of higher quality, and who are more resilient/persistent). It should also be noted here that, on any given paper, we might not expect inter-reviewer reliability at all if each reviewer is asked to review a manuscripts through a different lens (e.g., when a theory expert, a methods expert, and someone chosen to provide an outside opinion are selected). Thus, divergent reviews are not necessarily an indication that the 'system is broken'.

[2] For an exception, see Locke (2007).

[3] It should be noted that although impact factors are a commonly used metric, there are others (e.g., eigenvalue factor). Further, some scholars have criticized the impact factor as a method for assessing journal quality. Despite criticisms, the impact factor remains a recognized ranking device that editors must deal with on a regular basis.

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