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Scruples or Squabbles?

Floyd E. Bloom

Only months apart, the editors-in-chief of the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)* and of the *New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM)* were fired. Were these two highly publicized and contentious events indicators that editorial independence is being threatened at large, society-owned scientific journals?

Taken at face value, the two firings appear to reflect very different situations. George Lundberg lost his position at *JAMA* because he accelerated publication of an article on the attitudes of young adults toward definitions of oral sexual relations, allegedly to influence the then-current debates surrounding President Clinton. The American Medical Association (AMA) deemed this desire to influence political debate to be beyond the scope of *JAMA*'s mission and thus grounds for dismissal. No successor has yet been named. *JAMA*'s search committee (this editor-in-chief is a member) has labored for weeks to develop a system of governance to grant the new *JAMA* editor-in-chief editorial independence in content selection and dissemination.

Commenting editorially on the Lundberg firing, the *NEJM* editor-in-chief, Jerome Kassirer [*NEJM* 340, 466 (1999)], saw the AMA's intrusion into the editorial content of *JAMA* as both an "irrational decision and an ominous precedent." Kassirer's position, with which this editor concurs, is that decisions to accelerate publication of specific content of public interest are made often, especially on policy matters under public debate. *Science*'s publication of an editorial related to stem cell research and an article about ocean circulation and climate change before the Kyoto summit exemplify such decisions. The Massachusetts Medical Society, owners of the *NEJM* and several other publications, chose not to extend Kassirer's current term. *The Boston Globe* suggested that serious disagreements over the use of the name and logo of the *NEJM* on other planned Massachusetts Medical Society publications led to the nonrenewal [see *Science* 285, 648 (1999)]. However, a press release of 4 August 1999 announcing the intent to appoint *NEJM* Executive Editor Marcia Angell as interim editor-in-chief makes the former explanations somewhat dubious by saying, "Neither the logo nor the name of the *NEJM* will be used on other products or in marketing them without the approval of the Editor-in-Chief." Why then was Kassirer's term halted prematurely and in so undeservedly disgraceful a manner?

According to *The Boston Globe* (1 August 1999), the real battles were over much more contentious issues. Should advertisements remain clustered at the front and back of each issue, or would they be permitted within the editorial sections of the journal? Would the *NEJM* allow its name to be used in the sponsorship of commercially subsidized scientific meetings? In fact, perhaps these issues strike closer to more insidious root causes in both disputes. Who controls the decision whether to capitalize on the brand name of the print publication? Who is responsible when peer-reviewed content is converted into information aimed at wider audiences in all forms of media? Is it the society owner/publisher or the editor-in-chief? Consider the successes (at least in the eyes of stockbrokers) of *drkoop.com* and *WebMD* and the insatiable hunger of the public for reliable information on health and disease. Have these new markets for biomedical information driven out two of America's most distinguished editors-in-chief?

Science is not innately immune from such concerns; the present editor-in-chief and his immediate two predecessors benefited from intense debates over editorial independence within the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) in the early 1950s. In 1975-76, those debates led the board of directors and the AAAS Council to state: "The Executive Officer, as publisher, will exercise general management responsibility, and in close cooperation with the Editor-in-Chief, will see to the strengthening and improvement of *Science* as a primary activity of the AAAS. The Editor-in-Chief is responsible for the content and professional quality of *Science*."

New pressures from projects such as the National Institutes of Health's E-biosci [see *Science* 285, 810 (1999)] and the Department of Energy's PubSCIENCE compel editors to concentrate on how best to serve our readers by refining content into meaningful information. Editors must be free to navigate the editorial path but also be accountable for their journal's overall performance. *Science* mourns the distasteful and disruptive debacle of editor-sacking. Without editorial independence, there will be little content worthy of distillation into knowledge.

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