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The Nuts and Bolts of Publication in Health Communication

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Most established communication scholars already know the “how to” aspects of publishing in *Health Communication*, but newer researchers, those whose training was in other fields, or those who have moved into a faculty position with greater research demands may appreciate some guidance about our approach to the review process. Most of the practices of the journal are very similar to those of other academic publications, of course, but there are some nuances about which researchers may like to know.

All submissions begin at the electronic submission site: www.editorialmanager.com/hc (hereafter referred to as edmgr). Please make sure that the manuscript is prepared for anonymous review; this means it should not contain authorship information, in-text citations that might disclose the author(s), or even author identification in the file name. As an author submits an article, the system creates a PDF, which must then be approved by the author. The author review of the PDF is important, as we have had cases where the author did not approve the PDF and the submission was not processed any further. The submission isn’t sent to the editor until the author approves the PDF, so I wasn’t even able to notify the authors that they had missed a step until months later when they contacted me, asking about progress of the submission.

Once the PDF is approved by the author, it then shows up on my editorial menu as a new submission. I take a look at it and assign it to one of the senior editors or to me for reviewer assignment and other processing. Generally, I assign qualitative submissions to Lynn Harter, critical/cultural pieces to Mohan Dutta, quantitative campaign or media pieces to Brian Southwell, and quantitative interpersonal or organizational pieces to me. I should note that we haven’t received much organizational health communication scholarship; I’m not quite sure why that is the case, but it does not reflect our lack of interest. I’d like to receive more. In fact, what we have published in the first 100 issues is not a perfect guide to what topics and approaches we would like to publish in the next 100. All work linking health and communication is potentially appropriate for submission. We’d like to broaden the types of scholarship we publish.

Once I assign a piece to a senior editor, the most difficult step begins—finding reviewers! Our editorial board has grown exponentially over the years, and we use a lot of ad hoc reviewers, as well. But we receive so many submissions that we’re constantly working to find reviewers with appropriate expertise for each submission. The editors invite two or three reviewers to examine each submission. Unfortunately, a good portion of the time the invited
reviewers do not respond to the invitation. I know that’s difficult to believe, and you can imagine how frustrating it is. Thus, I plead with all of you as reviewers or potential reviewers: At least respond to the invitation! We understand that you cannot accept every invitation, but it is only fair to the editorial team and the author of the piece to officially decline if you can’t fit the review into your schedule—all you have to do is click on “decline”. Please do so immediately—the submission is in limbo until you do so. Many reviewers who don’t respond to the invitation right away forget to respond before the deadline. If you do have to decline, we very much appreciate it if you’ll suggest alternative reviewers. You’ve been invited to review the piece because of your expertise, so it’s likely that you will do a better job of suggesting alternative reviewers than will any of the editors. And please also remember that reviewing is a professional obligation—if you expect to publish in a journal, you should also be willing to review for it. We know that you’re busy, but so are all of us.

If a reviewer has not agreed to review the piece within 5 days, the system automatically “un-invites” the reviewer. A notice is then sent to the editor assigned to that submission indicating that another reviewer is needed. The process, thus, begins again. In some cases, the editor will have invited alternate reviewers at the time that the initial decisions regarding reviewers were made, and the alternate reviewers will then automatically be invited by the system without the editor taking further action. The process continues until at least two reviewers have agreed to respond to the article. Although we are sometimes able to quickly get two or three reviewers to agree to review, in many instances we have to go through a number of reviewers who decline or (worse!) do not respond to the invitation. In such cases it may take weeks before the process is successfully accomplished.

Then the wait begins. Some reviewers submit their reviews very promptly, for which my senior editors and I are eternally grateful! Each reviewer is asked to respond to each submission within 21 days of accepting the invitation. The system sends a reminder to the reviewer a few days prior to the due date for the review. If the reviewer has not responded by 7 days past the due date, another reminder is sent. The same thing happens after 14 and then again at 21 days. Fortunately, not too many reviewers take longer than that to respond, but every now and then we have reviewers who take forever to turn in their reviews. If, as an author, you’re wondering why you sometimes have to wait so long for feedback on your submission, you now have your answer—we’re waiting for reviews. There are never times when reviewers are not reminded, repeatedly, to submit reviews.

As an author, you can log into the system at any time and see where your submission currently is in the process. Should it ever happen that the system tells you that the reviews have been completed for several days and you haven’t heard back from the assigned editor, please send an e-mail to me (Thompson@udayton.edu)—I’ll check it out for you. Most commonly, this has happened because the initial two reviewers have radically disagreed about the piece and the editor has asked a third reviewer for a response.

Once the editor has the feedback necessary to make a decision, the editor then decides whether to “accept with revisions” (very rare that this is the initial decision), suggest a revision and resubmittal, reject the article, or suggest an alternate publication outlet. Notice that I didn’t even add “accept” without revisions as a category—I don’t believe that this has ever happened with an initial submission. That said, we also do want to encourage revision of any piece that shows promise. I think we’re less inclined to simply reject pieces for which reviewers identify concerns that are not fatal flaws than are some journals. Indeed, we will carefully read the comments of reviewers who recommend a rejection to make sure that the basis for their rejection is not something that could actually be rectified in a revision. I feel that young scholars should be encouraged and given the opportunity to learn how to turn their work into publishable form if it’s possible. I think, frankly, that this is one of the reasons that scholarship in the journal Health Communication and the field as a whole has flourished—we’ve had lots of promising young scholars who have learned to present their work appropriately instead of just having it rejected in an initial submission. We are certainly aware, however, of the criticisms of this approach. It makes more work for our reviewers, among other things. But many of the people who have now become senior scholars in the field can share with you the scathing reviews they initially received of work that was ultimately published. That being said, however, I must add that our final acceptance rate is only 13%. Standards are not lowered in the process of trying to mentor young scholars.

The two most common decisions are, of course, revise and resubmit, and reject. A large percentage of those authors who receive revise and resubmit decisions do not ultimately choose to do so, as it should be. The authors take a look at the suggested revisions and concerns raised by the reviewers and decide whether or not those are things that they feel they can and want to address in a revision. Sometimes the authors will seek further clarification from the handling editor as they make this decision.

There are several common concerns that lead to rejection. The most common one over the years has been a lack of an appropriate theoretical framework for the study. Theoretically based research is not only stronger in and of itself, but its generalizability is much greater. Research based on theory can be generalized not only to the particular issue/problem under investigation in that study, but also to other issues/problems to which that theory can be applied. Another common problem is lack of methodological detail. Please remember that a hallmark of good scholarship is providing enough detail for a study to be replicated. That’s how we build a body of knowledge. Another common problem
is a lack of a real focus on communicative processes. This concern doesn’t occur very frequently in research conducted by people whose training is in the field of communication, of course, but does occur in the work of scholars trained in other areas whose conceptualization of the process of communication may be less sophisticated than those who have “grown up” focusing on such processes. See also the Robinson and Agne article (this issue) for identification of ways in which the articles that are rejected tend to differ from those that are accepted.

If the manuscript is then revised and resubmitted, the process of review begins again. There’s another crucial step at this phase, however—the letter from the authors to the reviewers identifying the changes that have been made in the manuscript. This letter is not the same as the cover letter, as that doesn’t go to reviewers. This is a separate file. This letter is as important as the changes themselves. The authors must clearly, respectfully, and in detail explain how they have addressed the reviewers’ concerns. If they have chosen not to address certain concerns, they need to provide a rationale for not doing so. It is important to note that there may be strong arguments for not making changes, but the authors need to articulate those arguments in the response to the reviewers.

The authors must remember that the reviewers have already invested a significant amount of time in this endeavor. Reviewers are not compensated in any way for their service to the profession and the journal. They have given up time on their own research and home lives, etc., to review this manuscript, and the authors’ response to the reviewers must be phrased in light of this service that has been provided. Letters should not be defensive or insulting—I have in the past refused to send a resubmission back out for review until the authors revised the letter identifying changes. I’ve seen authors insult reviewers by accusing them of not understanding their article, etc. Although this may sometimes be true, the letter should phrase this issue provisionally and tactfully. It’s also important to remember that all the concerns raised by the reviewers should be addressed in some manner in the letter. It’s infuriating for a reviewer to spend his or her time evaluating a manuscript only to find that the comments made in an earlier review have been completely ignored by the authors. This letter should also clearly identify where and how in the revised manuscript the concerns have been addressed; it should not just note that they have been addressed. I don’t think that I’ve ever seen a letter that was too detailed in this regard, but I’ve seen lots that were not detailed enough.

Whether the revision is sent back to all of the original reviewers will depend upon the original recommendations of the reviewers. If one reviewer already voted for an acceptance with revisions, we won’t ask this individual to review it again. We’ll take a look at the manuscript ourselves to ascertain whether that reviewer’s concerns have been addressed. The manuscript will be returned to the other reviewers for their consideration. Please note that it is not unusual for a manuscript to go through multiple revisions before it is ultimately accepted for publication. I’ve had very-well-known senior scholars revise numerous times before the piece finally satisfied the reviewers and the editor. There are also times, however, where the decision after the initial revise and resubmit decision is ultimately a rejection. If the authors have not adequately addressed the concerns raised by the reviewers, the piece will probably be rejected at that point. Sometimes the authors, however, are given another opportunity to revise and resubmit the piece. This process can’t go on too long, of course, as our reviewers are already overworked. We can’t ask them to continue reviewing pieces if the author does not demonstrate a sincere effort and ability to address the concerns raised by the reviewers.

If a piece finally makes it to an acceptance with revisions, the author will then be asked to attempt to shorten the piece. Almost all of us write too much about our research, and there is virtually no time when a piece cannot be shortened by some judicious editing. As a young scholar, I once cut an invited Communication Quarterly piece that I had written for Gerry Phillips from 100 pages to 20 pages, so I’m not very sympathetic to authors who claim that they can’t cut anything from their manuscript. The letter of acceptance with revisions includes some suggestions about how to do so, and authors will also want to consider whether every table and figure is absolutely necessary. They take up a lot of room and are not always as elucidating as we as authors sometimes think they are. Some information can be noted as “available from the senior author” or posted on a website, the link for which can be indicated in the article. Some references can probably be cut. Additionally, now that the author has satisfied the reviewers, some of the rationale may be presented more succinctly. (Shh—don’t tell my reviewers that!)

Why do we need to cut the length of articles at this point? It’s because there is such a large amount of excellent health communication research being done that we can’t fit all of it in! It’s your fault, then, you wonderful researchers. For some time we’ve had a backlog of accepted pieces, and this is very frustrating for authors who are waiting (im)patiently for their work to appear in press. If every author cuts a few pages from his or her manuscript, I am able to fit another article into every issue. As most of you know, we have increased the length, size, and frequency of the journal more times than I can count over these last 100 issues. This has helped reduce our backlog, but we still have to do everything we can to further reduce it.

The letter of acceptance with revisions also indicates where authors should go to find the copyright agreement, which they then complete and fax to me. The authors make final revisions and submit this final version to the ed mgr system. Once the editor has approved the final version (which doesn’t always happen when the author thinks that it’s “final”—sometimes the editor will suggest more editing of the manuscript), the author receives an acceptance letter.
The manuscript then goes into the accepted queue, and, I’m afraid, another wait begins. It’s not unusual for the time from acceptance to publication to be a year, although we are gradually bringing that time frame down. But please be patient about that! If whether a piece is in press or has actually come out makes a difference for a tenure decision (but only in these circumstances), let me know through e-mail and I can sometimes move a piece up.

Please also know that you can’t plan to make substantive changes in the piece after you’ve submitted the final version. You certainly can’t do so at the proof stage. If you should discover a major mistake in the piece after you’ve submitted the final version but before you’ve received page proofs, contact me through e-mail immediately. We’ll try to work out something at that point. That will typically involve you sending a new version of the manuscript with necessary changes tracked; my editorial assistant will then enter them one at a time into the accepted file. This is a laborious process, of course, so we only do it if absolutely necessary. Other than that, you can correct only minor typographical errors and issues raised by the copyeditor after this point. So make sure that you’ve taken care of all the changes you will need to make prior to submitting that final version. Make sure that the references cited in the text and those listed in the reference list match exactly. Also, please note also that APA format does not include issue numbers for journals that are numbered sequentially within a volume. This is another common error we find in articles, and I’m really tired of having to correct it again and again and again. The copyeditor should not have to address such concerns; the author should take care of them prior to submission of the final version. Actually, a careful author does so prior to submission of the first version!

All accepted articles are, when the time comes, submitted to the publisher electronically through the ed mgr system. Within a few weeks after that, the submitting author will receive page proofs. This, too, is done electronically. You’ll receive a PDF of the article that will include questions/concerns from the copyeditor. You’ll be given a rather short period of time in which to proof these galleys, so you must get to them right away if you want your article to be published. Again, you cannot make any changes at this point except for corrections of errors made by the publisher and the addressing of concerns identified by the copyeditor. You’ll make these corrections on the website that contains the PDF of your article—it will have spaces below each page of the PDF to enter corrections. Please enter all corrections in this way, rather than utilizing any other method. I once had an author present a whole new PDF to my production editor, and expect her to figure out what was different in this new one from the old version! This author had made substantial wording changes, which you cannot do at proof stage. (Have I emphasized this enough?)

You’ll also receive information at the time of proofing about ordering reprints etc. The issue in which your article is being published will go to press within a few weeks of the time you receive your proofs, and you’ll then receive a copy of the journal itself. FINALLY! It’s a long process, but, as the many articles within this issue of the journal indicate, a worthwhile one. Here’s where we really have an opportunity to make an impact. You won’t want to end your efforts at the dissemination of your results at this point, however—you’ll want to do everything you can to let other relevant stakeholders know about your research. Here’s where you have your university’s PR office notify relevant media about your findings. Most likely, you’ve already been in contact with community groups or other practitioners about your findings—if not, this is the chance to do so. Let others know about your findings. Take a look at the many articles included within this issue about the impact of health communication findings on real people and real issues, and do what you can to bring about that impact. That’s why we do all this work, right? So get out there and make changes!

Whew! I’m exhausted just writing about this . . . ! But it’s worth it!