

The bastion of academic publishing: Editorial independence

Akademik yayıncılığın kalesi: Editöryal bağımsızlık

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Editorial independence constitutes the backbone of academic publishing. Fundamentally, it denotes a state in which the editor of a scientific journal remains free from the pressure or undue influence of journal proprietors, advertisers, funding bodies, or political authorities when determining content for publication. However, given the complexities of the contemporary publishing industry, this definition proves inadequate.

The tradition of scientific journal publishing, which originated in the 17th century with the establishment of the Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society, was initially an enterprise conducted by and for scientists. However, since the latter half of the 20th century, it has evolved into a vast global industry (Dixon & Eaton, 2025). The current literature points out a pronounced shift in the axis of debates on editorial independence. Historically, these discourses mainly centered on isolated instances of censorship or internal political friction within academic societies. Today, however, the debate has assumed a systemic nature, emphasizing platform capitalism, article processing charges (APCs), and big data.

Consequently, editors face the risk of being relegated from the primary gatekeepers of scientific rigor to a mere content managers for a commercial enterprise. In this sense, editorial independence is no longer merely an abstract principle; rather, it has evolved into a pressing practical concern confronted by tangible threats (Tennant et al., 2017).

Three primary organizations have established international consensus on the parameters of editorial independence, namely, the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE), and the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME). The definitions advanced by these bodies has constituted the normative foundation within the literature.

In its broadest sense, editorial independence dictates that decisions regarding a journal's content (i.e., which articles are published, including their framing and presentation) must be predicated solely upon scientific merit (ICMJE, 2023). In this context, independence signifies that editors possess autonomous decision-making authority, entirely free from the influence of commercial, institutional, ideological, or political stakeholders.

WAME (2009) demarcates editorial independence with the greatest precision: the Editor-in-Chief retains full authority over all of a journal's editorial content. This remit encompasses not only the acceptance or rejection of manuscripts but also the timing of their publication. Expanding on this notion, it posits that editorial independence extends beyond individual editors to encompass a broad institutional apparatus, including editorial boards, peer-review processes, and editorial policies. From this perspective, independence is an institutional characteristic and cannot be reduced to the preferences of a solitary editor.

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Alternatively, COPE (2025) approaches editorial independence as an indispensable prerequisite in safeguarding academic integrity. In addition to autonomy in decision-making, it advocates for ultimate authority among editors, particularly in the face of systemic threat. Furthermore, it underscores the necessity of absolute transparency in decision-making processes and the delineation of editors' responsibilities.

Bosman and Kramer (2018) argue that independence within academia must be approached from a multidimensional perspective, comprising content independence (the selection of articles for publication), process independence (encompassing peer review and evaluation procedures), and structural independence (the power dynamics between the journal proprietor and editors). Financial independence may also be appended to the dimensions defining scientific and political autonomy. Decoupling editorial decisions from a journal's revenue model can facilitate this autonomy (Bhui et al., 2025).

Why, then, is editorial independence crucial, and what is the extent of its importance? Editorial independence constitutes the foundational legitimacy of academic publishing. In its absence, the scientific literature faces the risk of reflecting funding structures, institutional pressures, or commercial priorities, instead of genuine research findings. Editorial independence is not a mere subset of academic freedom; it is a prerequisite. Therefore, safeguarding this independence is a collective responsibility shared by editors, peer reviewers, authors, funding bodies, and the readership. Robert K. Merton's seminal work in 1942 proposed four fundamental norms (CUDOS—communalism, universalism, disinterestedness, and organized skepticism) that define the ethos of modern science. Editorial independence serves as the institutional guarantor of these norms (Anderson et al., 2010).

Within the literature, scholars such as Ziman argue that as science transitions from an academic to a post-academic (industrial) phase, these norms are eroding, with Mertonian principles increasingly being replaced by market norms. In his work *Real Science*, Ziman (2000) delineates science's transition from an academic culture to an industrial one (collectivization). The author notes that within this new paradigm, researchers and—by extension—editors are no longer fully autonomous entities but accountable employees. This structural transformation renders the foundation of editorial independence increasingly precarious.

The recent past illustrates the formidable threats and risks currently confronting editorial independence. Jerome Kassirer, former editor of the *New England Journal of Medicine*, stands as one of the pre-eminent theorists on this subject. His dismissal (or forced resignation) in 1999, following a conflict with the journal's proprietor, the Massachusetts Medical Society, is widely regarded as the genesis of modern debates on editorial independence. Kassirer's departure was precipitated by his resistance to the society's management seeking to leverage the journal's brand for commercial co-branding ventures, rather than disputes over scientific content. This case demonstrates that editorial independence encompasses the selection of manuscripts as well as stewardship of the journal's brand (Lapeña, 2009).

Richard Smith is a former editor of the *British Medical Journal*. In his book entitled, *The Trouble with Medical Journals* (2006), he similarly reveals that the pharmaceutical industry poses a profound threat to editorial independence. The author contends that editorial freedom merely pertains to the liberty to publish the proprietor's prejudices, given that it does not upset advertisers. This radical critique underscores that the primary obstacle to editorial independence is a fundamentally flawed business model, instead of malevolent proprietors.

The Era of Journal Flipping and Collective Resistance

Traditionally, editors would resign individually when they were in conflict with a publisher's policies. However, in the post-2015 era, editorial boards have increasingly resigned en masse, transferring collective intellectual capital into a new journal in a practice known as journal flipping. This phenomenon provides evidence that editorial independence resides within the editorial board—not in a journal's title. The boundaries of editorial independence are delineated during moments of crisis—not in times of peace. Mass resignations and journal flipping incidents witnessed in recent years have forged a new paradigm of resistance within the literature, highlighted by several landmark cases.

Lingua to Glossa: The editorial board of *Lingua*, a prestigious journal in the field of linguistics, has collectively resigned as a protest against the publisher's exorbitant subscription fees and restrictive open-access policies. The board subsequently founded a new journal, *Glossa*. This case demonstrates that collective action and the transfer of symbolic capital are the most potent forms of leverage that editors possess against commercial proprietors. Furthermore, the new journal's swift ascent to a competitive position indicates that the academic community follows editors, instead of the imprint.

NeuroImage: The entire editorial board resigned following the publisher's refusal to reduce its steep APCs. The editors argued that actual publication costs were markedly lower, thereby condemning these excessive profit margins as unethical. In this case, the editors asserted their right and responsibility to intervene not only in the selection of manuscripts but also in the political economy of the journal. Consequently, the definition of independence expanded from the mere determination of content to dictation on the terms of access (Dattaro, 2023).

From Journal of Informetrics to Quantitative Science Studies (QSS): This editorial board resigned over APCs as well as due to an intractable dispute with the publisher regarding ownership of citation data. The editors advocated for open citation data (Open Citations); upon the publisher's refusal, they established the QSS. This incident serves as a critical precedent underscoring the data ownership dimension of editorial independence (Centre for Science and Technology Studies, 2019).

Canadian Medical Association Journal: This case illustrates risks inherent to society-owned journals. In 2006, the proprietor (the Canadian Medical Association) dismissed the journal's editor-in-chief, John Hoey, following the publication of an article critical of pharmacists' sales of an over-the-counter medication. This incident serves as a textbook example of how the commercial or political interests of medical societies can override scientific editorial decisions (Lapeña, 2009).

Various case studies demonstrate that the concept of editorial independence increasingly necessitates a broader definition; moreover, it is emerging as a matter of unprecedented importance. Conversely, threats directed toward editorial independence are progressively escalating and diversifying. As of 2026, financial pressures are at the forefront of the most significant threats. The increased marketization of academic publishing constitutes one of the most extensively documented sources of threat to editorial independence. The hegemony of multinational publishing conglomerates over a vast proportion of academic publishing within a monopolized market lays the groundwork for structural conflicts of interest (Larivière et al., 2015). Lastly, systemic risks associated with the funding structures of society and university-affiliated journals are also intensifying.

Another contemporary threat emerges in the context of digitalization and the role of artificial intelligence (AI). The integration of AI into academic publishing introduces novel dimensions of editorial independence that remain inadequately conceptualized. How will responsibility and accountability regarding AI tools be determined? Could these tools constitute an external source of pressure, and do the algorithmic biases they generate carry the risk of further exacerbating the existing power disparities? Ultimately, these questions indicate that the true extent of these threats remains undetermined (Hosseini et al., 2023).

Editorial independence is a fundamental principle that underpins the ethical infrastructure of academic publishing. Preserving this principle necessitates a multilayered approach that amalgamates structural safeguards, ethical standards, transparency mechanisms, and practices of collective professional advocacy. Intensifying commercial pressures in academic publishing, financial restructuring due to open access, and the transformative impacts of digital infrastructure clearly demonstrate that adopting editorial independence merely as a norm is no longer adequate. To enable this independence to function effectively, it must be fortified by concrete institutional mechanisms. The tendency for the practical dimensions of this issue to overshadow theoretical analyses has emerged as a primary focus within the research agenda. In summary, safeguarding editorial independence is not only the responsibility of individual editors or publishers but also a collective obligation that encompasses funding bodies, academic institutions, policymakers, and the

research community. The reliability and legitimacy of scientific knowledge depend inherently on the extent to which this principle is upheld.

Finally, since 2020, the Trakya University E-Journal of the Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, alongside its editorial board, has successfully preserved editorial independence against internal and external interferences. Although their resilience has been tested on numerous occasions, the editors have collectively managed to withstand pressure without compromise. In anticipation of pressure that may eventually prove insurmountable, contingency plans for journal flipping have frequently been placed on the agenda of the editorial board.

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Resources

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