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The Platform for Responsible Editorial Policies: An initiative to foster editorial transparency in scholarly publishing

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Key points

- The Platform for Responsible Editorial Policies (PREP) is an information source on editorial policies and peer review in scholarly publishing.
- PREP provides a database of editorial procedures for research purposes and offers customized advice to journal editors.
- PREP contributes to increased transparency of editorial procedures and offers resources for responsible journal management.

In response to calls for open science (Center for Open Science, 2018; cOAlition S, 2018), and transparent editorial policies in particular (ASAPbio, 2018; Squazzoni *et al.*, 2020), we the authors and colleagues from the Centre for Science and Technology Studies in Leiden recently launched the *Platform for Responsible Editorial Policies* (PREP via www.responsiblejournals.org). The platform contributes to openly shared editorial procedures for scholarly journals and ultimately aims to facilitate responsible journal management.

WHAT IS THE PLATFORM FOR RESPONSIBLE EDITORIAL POLICIES?

PREP is an online platform that collects and provides information on editorial procedures and peer review formats. It has five key features in which it aims to:

- facilitate editorial procedure transparency for journal editors,
- provide data for research on editorial procedures and the peer review process,

- advise journal editors and publishers on potential improvements of their editorial and peer review procedures,
- present integrated information about the variety of review procedures currently in use, and
- combine related initiatives presenting information on journal policies to facilitate responsible evaluation of journal management.

The platform maintains a database of journals' current editorial procedures, including aggregate statistics on how frequently certain procedures are used. This constitutes the core around which the other features are built. In the remainder of this article, we will discuss several contemporary concerns in academic publishing and how PREP may help to address them.

RATIONALE OF DEVELOPMENT

PREP was established in the context of several concerns currently haunting the scholarly publishing environment.

Transparency of editorial procedures

The editorial assessment of journal submissions and the embedding of peer review in this assessment is becoming increasingly complex and diverse (Ross-Hellauer, 2017; Siler & Strang, 2017). Triggered by a wide variety of expectations for journals' editorial processes, journals have started to experiment with new ways of organizing their editorial assessment and peer review systems. Some are experimenting with radically new ways to judge whether manuscripts are fit for publication, such as mega-journals abandoning importance or expected impact as a selection criterion. Other journals are moving beyond the idea that completed manuscripts reporting on finalized research projects should constitute the nexus for assessment. Traditionally, peer review takes place between submission and publication of a manuscript. However, two new forms of peer review timing have emerged in which manuscripts are reviewed at other stages of completion: pre-submission reviews assess manuscripts only on their research plan and rationale, whereas post-publication review assesses manuscripts that have already gone through review, sometimes including their review reports. These practices have been implemented in some journals, especially in the fields of psychology and biomedicine (Center for Open Science, 2018; Knoepfler, 2015), but their uptake still remains rather limited (Horbach & Halfman, 2019b). These constitute just a few examples of the wide variety of review formats and editorial assessment strategies currently in use (Horbach & Halfman, 2018).

The arrival of these innovations in an already diverse set of practices of peer review and editorial selection means we can no longer assume that authors, readers, and reviewers simply know how editorial assessment operates. Nevertheless, many journals are not particularly generous in providing information about their editorial procedures in publicly available sources such as their webpages (Horbach & Halfman, 2019a). If any information on editorial procedures is given, this is usually restricted to general statements claiming that review is 'blind' or that review reports are 'open', without further specifying details.

Despite this general opaqueness, several actors in the publishing process could benefit from transparency of editorial procedures. Authors are entitled to know exactly how and on what grounds their manuscript will be assessed. Reviewers benefit from clear and specific instructions about their task and role in the review process. Even journals themselves may benefit as quality journals may distinguish themselves from predatory ones by articulating clear editorial policies.

Research into editorial procedures

Transparent policies also enable research on the benefits of different peer review practices, which is required to ultimately facilitate better review. In the highly diverse landscape of review procedures, little evidence exists on which practices work best. Several actors have therefore urged for more research on review formats, acknowledging that a lack of data is one of the main barriers to such research (Rennie, 2016; Squazzoni *et al.*, 2020).

Assessment of journal quality

Third, transparency of editorial procedures is required to allow for responsible evaluation of journal quality. Several efforts have recently been undertaken with the aim to responsibly evaluate scholarly publishing outlets and to displace the dominance of impact factors in the assessment of research (Hicks, Wouters, Waltman, De Rijcke, & Rafols, 2015). Key in this endeavour is that journals are assessed on a plurality of features, rather than a single indicator (Wouters *et al.*, 2019).

These may comprise a wide set of journal features, including open access status and policy, pre-printing policies, time taken for review, and user experience with the editorial process. In addition, it could include the very way in which a journal organizes its editorial process and how it aims to contribute to quality assurance of the published record. Some laudable initiatives have already set out to establish a way of assessing journals based on their commitment to transparency and open science, particularly the TOP Factor initiative (Center for Open Science, 2020), based on the TOP guidelines (Nosek *et al.*, 2015). PREP aims to contribute to such initiatives.

HOW WAS PREP ESTABLISHED?

PREP emerged as a response to these concerns. During a workshop in July 2018 at Leiden University, attended by publisher representatives, journal editors, librarians, researchers of academic publishing, and members of editor associations, a declaration was drafted asking journals to be transparent about their editorial policies (Horbach, Halfman, De Rijcke, Reyes Elizondo, & Van Leeuwen, 2018). This *Leiden Declaration for Transparent Editorial Policies* was drafted by all workshop participants and subsequently signed by other stakeholders. In addition, some suggestions were made for how to facilitate such transparency. This ultimately led to the establishment of the *Platform for Responsible Editorial Policies*. The platform was developed in cooperation between the authors of this article and Leiden Universities' Centre for Science and Technology Studies (CWTS). It was supported by funding from the Dutch Health funding agency ZonMw.

PREP'S CORE FEATURES

PREP consists of several main features, each of which we will briefly discuss below. In this discussion, we will relate PREP's parts to the concerns that the platform aims to address.

Database

First and foremost, PREP provides insight into specific journals' peer review procedures in the form of a database based on a dozen questions, each with several multiple-choice answer possibilities. The answers to these questions characterize the

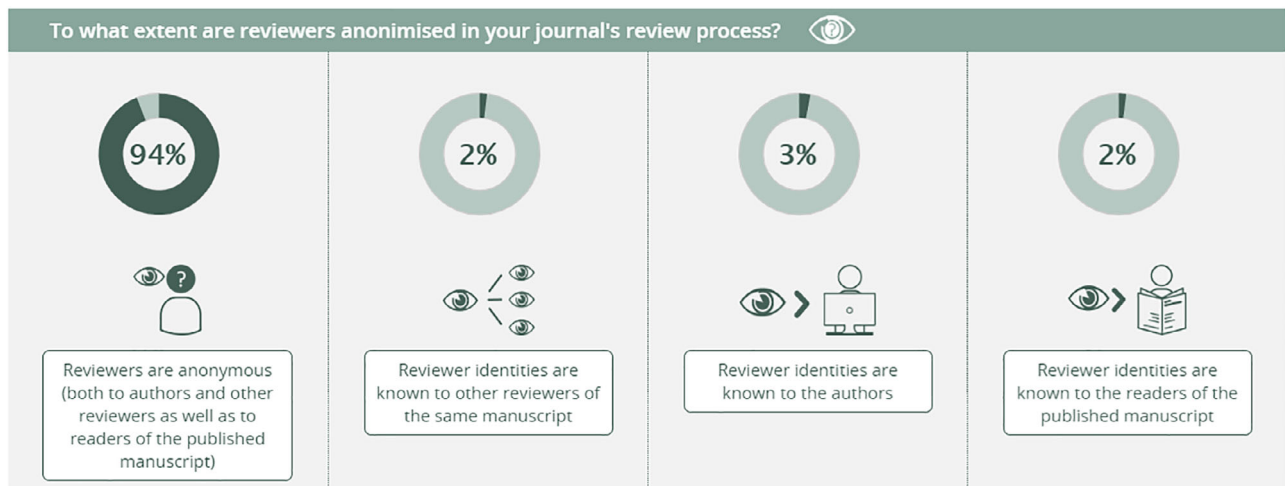


FIGURE 1 Aggregate statistics on the extent to which reviewers are anonymized in journals' review process. Statistics were taken from the database on March 11, 2020, at that moment containing 353 journals.

editorial procedures of a journal, including the type of peer review used. This includes the *anonymity* level of authors and reviewers, whether *digital tools* such as plagiarism scanners are used, or the *timing* of peer review in the research and publication process. PREP displays which journals are using which procedures and presents aggregate statistics of their occurrence across journals. A sample of 353 journals, obtained through a previous study on review practices (Horbach & Halfman, 2019b), forms the start of the openly accessible editorial procedures database. The 12 questions are grouped in four categories: Timing and Selectiveness, Openness of Review, Specialisation of Review, and Technological Support in Review. The aggregate statistics show, for instance, that editorial procedures in which reviewer identities are kept anonymous are by far prevalent over other models (Fig. 1).

Novel input to the database is crowd-sourced by inviting editors and publishers to answer the 12 questions about their journals' editorial procedures in a questionnaire. Once such data are provided, the response is verified by PREP's developers to check whether it originates from legitimate journals (i.e. using suggested means to distinguish between predatory and legitimate journals (Hansoti, Langdorf, & Murphy, 2016; Strinzel, Severin, Milzow, & Egger, 2019). Response data are also checked for consistency, and in case of doubt, the responsible editor is contacted. After these checks, the journal is added as a new entry to the database. PREP also facilitates bulk upload of data by journal collectives or publishers. Editors are invited to notify the platform in case a journal updates its editorial procedures at a later stage. Either by filling out the short survey another time or by contacting PREP's developers through the website's contact form, they can notify PREP of their new procedures.

The database of journals' review procedures can be freely downloaded as an Excel file to allow for easy usage in research on editorial procedures and peer review models.

Facilitating transparency and suggesting alternative procedures

As a second main feature, PREP invites editors to provide the relevant information for their journals and thereby include them in the database. With this information, editors can facilitate transparency of review procedures and contribute to open science. In response to editors filling out the short multiple-choice questionnaire of 12 questions, PREP will provide tailored suggestions for potential improvements to editorial procedures. Based on the extant literature on various review models, PREP provides editors with specific suggestions for alternative ways of organizing their editorial process, including issues particularly relevant to the journal's research area (such as the specialized review of statistics, if relevant).

In addition, PREP suggests possible improvements on the journal's transparency of peer review procedures and editorial policies, such as policies on corrections and retractions, in line with the *transparency declaration* (Horbach *et al.*, 2018). To further help journals become transparent about their editorial policies, PREP generates textual material that can be used on a journal's webpage to foster transparency about its peer review procedures.

Information on review models

Third, PREP provides background information on different models of editorial assessment. With so many different shapes and flavours in editorial procedures, it might be difficult by now for journal editors to get a good and comprehensive overview of the possibilities for their editorial process. To address this, PREP provides web-friendly information about different review procedures. It explains the difference between various procedures, for example, single- and double-blind procedures, various forms of open review, or registered reports (focusing review on research

protocols rather than results) and traditional pre-publication review, including the rationale for their development and the evidence base for their effectiveness in the literature. This information, including infographics, is freely accessible and can thus be used for information, training, and educational purposes.

Combining related initiatives

Fourth, PREP aims to facilitate the responsible evaluation of scholarly publishing outlets. Moving away from the dominant approach of relying on simple bibliometric indicators such as the Journal Impact Factor, PREP acknowledges that a multiplicity of factors should be considered when assessing journal quality. The organization of journals' editorial process is but one of these factors. Therefore, PREP combines related initiatives that gather and display other information of journals' policies and performance. A host of such initiatives has been launched over the past years. These include initiatives presenting information on journals' open access status and policies, journals' pre-print policies, and user experiences with journals' review process. By directing visitors to these initiatives and their underlying data sources, PREP aims to facilitate actors responsibly evaluating journal quality based on features of particular interest to individual stakeholders.

RELATED INITIATIVES, COOPERATION, AND FUTURE PLANS

PREP is one of the platforms in a broader set of initiatives aiming to increase transparency of editorial policies and peer review procedures. Several recent initiatives have emerged in which data are collected and shared about journals' editorial and publishing procedures. Most notably, these include the Transpose initiative, providing information on review procedures and pre-printing policies and currently hosting a database of over 3,000 journals (e.g. <https://transpose-publishing.github.io/#/>). PREP and Transpose are currently cooperating by aligning their initiatives in order to maintain a sustainable platform. In addition, the developers of both platforms aim to collaborate with other initiatives to facilitate synergies and to avoid redundancy. These wider initiatives include the SherpaRomeo platform, hosting a database with information on journals' open access policies (<https://v2.sherpa.ac.uk/romeo/>); the SciRev platform, collecting user experiences with journals' editorial process (<https://scirev.org/>); the Directory of Open Access Journals (www.doaj.org); the Quality Open Access Market (QOAM) platform, a database providing open access information to facilitate authors in choosing a journal (www.qoam.eu); and the earlier mentioned TOP Factor platform. PREP contributes to these by specifically focussing on editors as users, facilitating transparency, and providing information and advice on alternative editorial procedures. We believe that the various initiatives contributing to transparent policies can meaningfully complement each other and envision a wider, community-led integration of the various data sources. This also includes the cooperation with leading stakeholders such as publishers, editor

collectives such as the European Association of Science Editors and the Committee on Publication Ethics, and publishing associations such as STM. Aligning our initiative with their goals and existing frameworks will facilitate smooth provision of journal information to PREP's database, as well as allow for wider fostering of editorial transparency.

The cooperation with related initiatives and other stakeholders also contributes to potential plans for future developments of PREP. These developments may include the collection and provision of additional journal data, such as average turn-around times, policies on corrections and retractions, or open access status. The collection of these data could, for instance, be achieved through the integration of several of the above-mentioned initiatives. PREP is also considering building tools for easier integration with other platforms or journal webpages to allow journal information to be displayed on these other outlets.

CONCLUSION

With these features, PREP aims to contribute to more responsible journal management and to open science. Over the past years, it has become clear that increased editorial transparency is one of the key features to achieve these goals. PREP resonates with these interests and stakes, among others, witnessed by a steady increase in the number of submissions to our database. By supporting authors, reviewers, and editors in obtaining information about the editorial process of academic journals, PREP addresses well-known issues with one of science's central institutions. In addition, researchers on peer review processes have welcomed the platform as it enables research on different formats' strengths and weaknesses. However, PREP forms only part of the solution towards a more open and transparent form of scholarly communication. Through the collaboration with related initiatives and leading publishing stakeholders, we aim to keep working towards a more integrated approach of addressing issues in editorial procedures, peer review, and publishing initiatives. This should ultimately lead to more open and responsible scholarly publishing.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors contributed to the development of PREP; SPJMH and WH contributed to obtaining the first sample of journal data, and all authors contributed to the writing of the manuscript.

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