



# NEUROLOGÍA

www.elsevier.es/neurologia



## EDITORIAL

### Editorial independence and scientific publications

J. Matías-Guiu\* and R. García-Ramos

Servicio de Neurología, Instituto de Neurociencias, Hospital Clínico San Carlos,  
Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Madrid, Spain

Received on 24th March 2010; accepted on 30th March 2010

#### KEYWORDS

Editorial  
independence;  
Medical publications;  
Editors

#### PALABRAS CLAVE

Independencia  
editorial;  
Publicaciones médicas;  
Editores

#### Abstract

**Introduction:** Various cases of editors of leading journals resigning have led to a debate on the question of editorial independence, understood as the unconditional freedom of editors to approve the contents of their journals.

**Method:** An analysis is made of cases in which editorial independence has been questioned, as well as the position those who resolutely defend it against those who consider that it must be limited by the institutions of which they are their organs of expression.

**Conclusions:** Editors of scientific publications not only have to be judges of the articles they receive, but they must also be judged by their decisions, and editorial independence cannot be a refuge for personal stances. By independence it must be understood as the meticulousness in accepting manuscripts and the application of transparent criteria.

© 2010 Sociedad Española de Neurología. Published by Elsevier España, S.L. All rights reserved.

#### Independencia editorial y publicaciones científicas

#### Resumen

**Introducción:** Diversos casos de cese de editores de grandes revistas han llevado al debate la cuestión de la independencia editorial, entendida como la libertad no condicionada del editor para aprobar los contenidos de su revista.

**Desarrollo:** Se realiza un análisis de los casos en que se ha cuestionado la independencia editorial, así como la posición de quienes la defienden a ultranza frente a los que consideran que debe estar limitada por las instituciones de las que son órganos de expresión.

**Conclusiones:** Los editores de las publicaciones científicas no sólo deben ser jueces de los artículos que reciben, sino que deben ser juzgados por sus decisiones, y la independencia editorial no puede dar amparo a posicionamientos personales. Por independencia debe entenderse la escrupulosidad en la aceptación de los manuscritos y la aplicación de criterios transparentes.

© 2010 Sociedad Española de Neurología. Publicado por Elsevier España, S.L. Todos los derechos reservados.

\*Corresponding author.

E-mail: inc.hcsc@salud.madrid.org (J. Matías-Guiu).

## Introduction

There is a tendency to evaluate the role of scientific journals from the perspective of the author. The author attempts to disseminate the findings of his research or experiences through publications; but publishing is not just about communicating advances,<sup>1</sup> it also has further implications at the personal, institutional, national and corporate levels. Journals are interpreted from a liability standpoint, understanding that they publish the contents they receive when these have sufficient quality and interest, after an appropriate selection process, within a given framework of contextual and operational decisions. However, this is not absolutely true, since journals have their own interests and dependencies and their editors not only share these, but also add their own. In recent years, some publications and some publishers have defended the issue of editorial independence,<sup>2</sup> especially those having a broad relationship with companies or scientific associations.<sup>3</sup> In this article we attempt to review the issue of editorial independence from the perspective of the current management team of *Neurología*.

## Cases and debate on editorial independence

Some specific cases have led to editorial responses and have generated a debate about the issue of editorial independence. Doubtless, the Kassirer<sup>4</sup> case had an unprecedented impact on the scientific and academic communities, given that it had never occurred that the chief editor of one of the highest impact medical journals, such as *The New England Journal of Medicine*, was dismissed due to discrepancies with those responsible for the scientific association in relation to actions on the market.<sup>5</sup> Apparently, Kassirer did not share the promotional criteria for the magazine, and these differences led to his dismissal. Similarly, a few months before, the resignation of George Lumberg,<sup>6</sup> editor-in-chief of *JAMA*, could have the same significance<sup>7</sup> but for different reasons. Another more recent case has raised the question of independence in literature. This refers to the cessation of some editors from the *Canadian Medical Association Journal*.<sup>8</sup> In February 2006, two of the main editors of the magazine were dismissed under the pretext of a renewal of the editorial team, but it was later known to be due to discrepancies between the editorial team and the association about the advisability of publishing information regarding the "morning-after" pill. The response of the major editors in defence of the dismissed editors was forceful.<sup>9</sup> Later, the editorial company of the *Croatian Medicine Journal* was reproached by its university managers for its repeated publication of fraud cases, with this intrusion even reaching the courts.<sup>10,11</sup> Regardless of the importance of the issue represented by fraud,<sup>12</sup> the university officials felt that the publication of these cases in the journal was excessive. The question of whether the editor of a scientific publication should be above the constraints of a company or the institutional positions of a scientific association or, conversely, should follow the lines marked is the crux of a debate that has a clear ideological stance.

The advocates of the first approach believe that science is a public good. Therefore, science does not belong to any company or association and that scientific publishers are appointed from the standpoint of science rather than companies and, consequently, should be independent, without constraints. If science has no limits, except for those of ethics, journals arising from science should not have them either; therefore, editorial autonomy is the requisite counterpart to maintain the freedom of expression needed by scientific development. The other perspective is also ideological and believes that magazines have a mission, defined by organisations that are organs of speech, and that the independence of publishers should be framed within it. The managers of the institutions therefore have a responsibility to adapt the mission in time and the editor, to execute it, creating a balance between autonomy and management.

Without a doubt, although the debate is ideological, the reader will be able to appreciate that points of conflict are not and have to do with concessions from magazines to financiers, industry relations, subscription generation policies or positions in the face of temporary circumstances. Finally, magazines are a product that must be sold to be sustainable, which give rise to the conflict about what should prevail: corporate or scientific criteria,<sup>13</sup> and if the balance should be influenced by issues such as context<sup>14</sup> or language.<sup>15</sup> In a recent article in which 33 editors were asked about their degree of independence, only 70% felt that their autonomy was complete, although 30-45% had been under pressure over editorial content. Furthermore, in nearly 50% of the journals, the managers responsible for the scientific associations had the authority to dismiss or terminate the editor.<sup>16</sup>

## The position of the editors

The international committee of medical editors traditionally referred to as the Vancouver Group, which is led by the heads of the major medical journals, has a clear and defined position, without any sort of doubts.<sup>17</sup> The editor must have full independence and be isolated from strategic market, financial or political issues. However, in most publications it is not easy for the editors to maintain this isolation, which has been compared with the case of Don Quixote. In their opinion, editors must enter into contentious issues, even if this means committing their institutions and their journals.<sup>18</sup> However, some publishers have drawn attention to the fact that insisting on trying to maintain this isolation can lead to bad decisions and biases, by making the position of editor a central element above the criteria of quality and interest inherent to an article.<sup>19</sup>

In fact, when readers of a high-impact journal have been polled on whether the topics being published were of interest to them, the percentage of affirmative responses was low.<sup>20,21</sup> But this unequivocal position of the editors of major journals does not always correspond to the operational decisions of the editors of major publications, especially when they have strong opinion content. These editors are publishing professionals, while those who run smaller journals are recruited from clinical practice or research,<sup>22</sup>

and that involves the continuance in the position. While in the latter publishers are transient, in the former they have long careers, constituting a specific lobby that is justified by their professionalism and experience, but which gives them a firm sense of stability.

## Independence and policy

The question is whether publishers are insulated in their decision making and, therefore, if they apply editorial independence only in favour of science. Recent examples have raised doubts about this approach. The opposition by France to the war in Iraq led to a covert boycott of French products in the U.S. and it has been noted that it also led to a decrease in acceptance by the Anglo-Saxon high-impact journals of articles produced in France.<sup>23</sup> While items from Spain, pro-Iraq war, increased by 100% the acceptance of manuscripts from France and Sweden fell by over 20% in high-impact journals in the United States. Although with a lower percentage, the data were similar in British publications. We should note that we could not resist the temptation to review the data relating to Spain in high-impact publications in the U.S., particularly to assess whether the Spanish withdrawal from the war had any influence. While it is true that there was an increase in the articles accepted between July 2003 and June 2004 compared to the previous year and that the following year there was a return to the initial figures, a year after the withdrawal (when the consequence could be observed), there was a increase similar to the preceding one in papers accepted, increasing slightly the following year. We therefore do not think that it is possible to reproduce in Spain the situation that authors described for France; variations in acceptance may thus be related to other factors.

The previously-mentioned dismissal of Georges Lumberg from *JAMA* can also be understood from a political standpoint, as it was due to the publication of an article that established the sexual pattern of students in the USA<sup>24</sup>, and which indicated that oral sex was not considered a sexual act. The publication of this article, prioritised by the editor, coincided with the trial of Bill Clinton for his relationship with Monica Lewinski. Although some sectors felt that the decision by Ratcliffe Anderson, vice president of the American Medical Association, was correct<sup>25</sup> because this article could have an influence on that trial, most editors from major magazines positioned themselves closer to Lumberg, covered by editorial independence.<sup>26,27</sup>

Accusations that scientific journals and, therefore, their editors take part in politics have also appeared. In June of last year, for example, an Israeli publication reported that some English impact publications favoured the Palestinian cause through medical articles, particularly after the publication of an article on medicine in Palestine<sup>28</sup> that accused Israel of withholding healthcare in the territory. This short article, submitted as a comment, had not passed through the filter of editorial review, and its publication was the editor's personal decision. The article claimed that English journals such as *BMJ* and *The Lancet* published articles defending the Palestinian position under the guise

of being medical articles, and that this was not the case in publications from the USA.<sup>29</sup> An extensive debate took place in the form of letters and electronic contributions on *BMJ* and even on *The Lancet*, supporting the journals and defending the position that approach the matter was correct. However, the involvement of medical journals in wars had been seen previously, and it had even been supported.<sup>30</sup> This was admitted by one of the *BMJ* editors in an editorial in his journal,<sup>31</sup> in which he defended that medical journals should adopt some political approaches. This statement led to a remarkable number of letters demanding independence between political issue and medical publishing; some submission argued against the editorial<sup>32</sup> and others in its favour.<sup>33</sup> In any case, it seems inconsistent to defend editorial independence as something rigid and impassive and enter into matters of opinion that cannot be analysed from the filter of scientific methodology because of its own connotations.

## Conclusions

Editorial independence is certainly a theoretical concept, based on the idea that journal editors should have complete autonomy to set the contents, so that the prevailing criteria are scientific ones. Like any theoretical concept, it is difficult to disagree with it, but its applicability is more debatable. Editors must have an editorial policy<sup>34,35</sup> and it seems reasonable for it to be consistent with the general lines of the publication and the institutions for which they serve as images. The main point is not editorial independence used as a shield to repel responsibilities; the most essential part is that the publisher should make fair and appropriate decisions considering all the elements influencing the magazine—elements ranging from the quality, originality, relevance and interest for readers of the manuscript to the personality of the publication, its scope of action, and also its strategy and the institution that it represents.<sup>36</sup> The balance of all aspects from the perspective of the editors' experience and professionalism within the framework is what should guide the decision, and it must be independent. As noted by Smith, former editor of the *British Journal of Anaesthesia*, editorial independence does not make it possible for the editor to act as an autocrat<sup>37</sup> or be allowed to make incompetent or unjust decisions. The Pearce case was demonstrative of a justified dismissal, when an editor was terminated after accepting two articles written by a member of his team, one of them fraudulent, which had not gone through the external review process and in which the editor appeared as author,<sup>38</sup> violating authorship provisions.<sup>39</sup>

It seems reasonable that editors of scientific publications are not only judges of the articles they receive, but can also be judged themselves,<sup>40</sup> and that editorial independence cannot protect personal positions. The editor can express opinions through editorials or opinion articles, but in no case does it seem justifiable for these to influence their editorial decisions.

Editors should take into consideration not only the articles themselves that they receive, but also the view of readers, as well as, in the case of *Neurología*, the strategic positions of the Spanish Society of Neurology. Editorial

independence must be grounded on all these considerations. Independence should be understood as being scrupulous in the acceptance of manuscripts and implementing transparent criteria.

## References

- Angell M. Publish or perish: a proposal. *Ann Intern Med.* 1986;104:261-2.
- Parmley WW. Editorial Independence: What did we learn from the Journal of the American Medical Association? *J Am Coll Cardiol.* 1999;33:2083-4.
- Matias-Guiu J. Autores, lectores y sociedades científicas. *Rev Neurol.* 1995;23:25-6.
- Hoey J. When journals are branded, editors get burnt: the ousting of Jerome Kassirer from the New England Journal of Medicine. *CMAJ.* 1999;161:529-30.
- Kassirer JP. Editorial independence. *N Engl J Med.* 1999;340:1671-2.
- Horton R. The sacking of JAMA. *Lancet.* 1999;353:252-3.
- Fletcher SW, Fletcher RH. Medical editors, journal owners, and the sacking of George Lundberg. *J Gen Intern Med.* 1999;14:200-2.
- Armstrong P, Cashman NR, Cook DJ, Feeny DH, Ghali WA, De Grujil FR, et al. A letter from CMAJ's editorial board to the CMA. *CMAJ.* 2002;167:1230.
- Kassirer JP. Assault on editorial independence: improprieties of the Canadian Medical Association. *J Med Ethics.* 2007;33:63-6.
- Marusic M, Marusic A. Threats to the integrity of the Croatian Medical Journal: an update. *Croat Med J.* 2008;49:8-11.
- Sibbald B. Croatian Court vindicates journal editor. *CMAJ.* 2009;181:155-6.
- Matias-Guiu J, García-Ramos R. Fraude y conductas inapropiadas en las publicaciones científicas. *Neurología.* 2010;25:1-4.
- Smith R. Another editor bites the dust. Trust is needed to balance editorial independence and accountability. *BMJ.* 1999;319:272.
- Matias-Guiu J. Revista de Neurología, el reto de la difusión de las neurociencias en español. *Rev Neurol.* 2000;30:35-40.
- Matias-Guiu J. Las publicaciones científicas en español. *Rev Neurol.* 1996;24:506-7.
- Davis RM, Müllner M. Editorial independence at medical journals owned by professional associations: a survey of editors. *Sci Eng Ethics.* 2002;8:513-28.
- International Committee of Medical Journal Editors. Editorial freedom. *Br Med J.* 1988;297:1182.
- Kassirer JP. JAMA: Why be a medical editor? *JAMA.* 2001;285:2253.
- Lapeña JF. Editorial independence and the editor owner relationship: Good editors never die, they just cross the line. *Singapore Med J.* 2009;50:1120-2.
- Lundberg GD, Paul MC, Fritz H. A comparison of the opinions of experts and readers as to what topics a general medical journal (JAMA) should address. *JAMA.* 1998;280:288-90.
- Justice AC, Berlin JA, Fletcher SW, Fletcher RH, Goodman SN. Do readers and peer reviewers agree on manuscript quality? *JAMA.* 1994;272:117-9.
- Garrow J, Butterfield M, Marshall J, Williamson A. The reported training and experience of editors in chief of specialist clinical medical journals. *JAMA.* 1998;280:286-7.
- Bégaud B, Verdoux H. Did the US boycott of French products spread to include scientific output? *BMJ.* 2004;329:1430-1.
- Sanders SA, Reinisch JM. Would you say you 'had sex' if ...? *JAMA.* 1999;282:275-7.
- Minuth A. The sacking of JAMA. *Lancet.* 1999;353:1104.
- Smith R. The firing of brother George. *BMJ.* 1999;318:210.
- Kassirer JP. Editorial independence. *N Engl J Med.* 1999;340:1671-2.
- Shoenfeld Y, Shemer J, Keren G, Blachar Y, Edelman LA, Borow M. British medical journals play politics. *Isr Med Assoc J.* 2009;11:325-7.
- Abramsky O. Letter to the Royal College of Physicians (London): take anti-Israeli politics out of medicine. *Isr Med Assoc J.* 2009;11:334.
- Bloom JD, Sambunjak D, Sondorp E. High-impact medical journals and peace: a history of involvement. *J Public Health Policy.* 2007;28:341-55.
- Delamothe T. How political should a general medical journal be? *BMJ.* 2002;325:1431-2.
- Marchetti P. How political should a general medical journal be? Medical journal is no place for politics. *BMJ.* 2003;326:820.
- Taracena GA. How political should a general medical journal be? We cannot be apolitical. *BMJ.* 2003;326:820.
- Lawrence PA. The politics of publication. *Nature.* 2003;422:259-61.
- Delamothe T, Smith R. Redesigning the journal: having your say. *BMJ.* 1996;312:232-5.
- Matias-Guiu J, García-Ramos R. El factor de impacto y las decisiones editoriales. *Neurología.* 2008;23:342-8.
- Smith G. Scientific journals with editorial independence: an endangered species? *Curr Opin Anaesthesiol.* 2000;13:187-90.
- Lock S. Lessons from the Pearce affair: handling scientific fraud. *BMJ.* 1995;310:1547-8.
- Matías-Guiu J, García-Ramos R. Autor y autoría en las publicaciones médicas. *Neurología.* 2009;24:1-6.
- Pay JG. Judging the judges: the role of journal editors. *QJM.* 2002;95:769-74.