Interlocking Editorships in Scientific Journals

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Dear Editor,

Journals’ Editors and editorial board members (hereafter EBMs) play a crucial role of determining the future direction of scientific disciplines and intellectual gatekeeping of scholarly communications through their decisions on what research gets published in scientific journals. EBMs are appointed based on their academic recognition, scholarly achievements and research credibility. Responsibilities of EBMs including, but not limited to: developing the journal’s editorial policy and ethical guidelines, managing the journal’s activities, attracting new submissions and reviewing articles. It is a common phenomenon that one scholar sits on multiple journals’ editorial boards, which is documented as ‘interlocking editorships’ (Baccini and Barabesi 2010).

To find out the prevalence of this phenomenon at a country level, the composition of EBMs of 518 journals in the humanities and social sciences accredited by the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology of Iran was investigated. The information about characteristics of editorial board members was collected from the home page of the journals’ website. Results reveal that 2573 unique individuals holding the 5188 editorial board positions (an average of 10 members per journal). 58.8\% of the academics (1513) have editorial board appointment in a single journal. 431 individuals (16.8\%) serve on two editorial boards while 248 individuals (9.6\%) serve on three editorial boards. 13 scholars serve on 10 or more editorial boards. The highest number of board appointments held by one individual is 18, two academics

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hold 14 memberships, two have 13, five have 12, one has 11 and two have 10. It is much higher than the results of previous studies which reported the maximum number of board memberships lie within the range of four to eight (Chan and Fok 2003; Chan et al. 2005; Cronin 2009; Burgess and Shaw 2010; Cabanac 2012).

Nomination to multiple journals’ editorial boards is one measure of professional recognition and success which provides reputation and honor for the members, but accompanied by a high level of work, obligation and tension. The work of Journals’ EBMs requires judgment and their decisions affect the careers of other academics. These judgments can be affected by a heavy workload, time limitations, cognitive abilities and other perceptual biases that human beings are subject to. Since an individual’s time, energy and commitment are limited, we might expect the number of board appointments that individuals can take along with other duties to be restricted. In the case of the humanities and social sciences journals in Iran, the number of journals has increased significantly in recent years, while in many disciplines, a limited number of potential senior academic elites with a substantial history of research excellence existed. Considering the situation that multiple editorial board holders are overwhelmingly senior-level and mid-career academics with various teaching, research, leadership and administrative responsibilities, one may raise the question as to whether some of the EBMs with numerous memberships (e.g. 18) get appointed to gain institutional legitimacy or to elevate the prestige of the journals. This may be the case particularly with new established or lower quality journals that are looking to obtain a reputation by attracting well-known academics as their EBMs.

Reviewing articles, establishing policies, making editorial decisions and getting together for editorial meetings takes a considerable amount of time, attention and care from EBMs. Given that younger assistant professors only constitute 10.6% of the EBMs in the studied journals, appointing new members with proven records of scholarly achievements, broad and up-to-date knowledge of the field, outstanding organizational and communication skills, intellectual curiosity, networking abilities and passion for learning from long-standing senior members can be suggested to ensure the advancement of scholarship.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest Authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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