The parable of the mandarin

In response to the articles and editorial in the May issue of *EMBO reports* that commented on the strengths and weaknesses of the peer review system (Gannon F (2005) *EMBO Rep* 5: 387; Greener M (2005) *EMBO Rep* 5: 402–404; Hunter P (2005) *EMBO Rep* 5: 405–407), we would like to draw attention to another discouraging aspect, namely the disproportionate power and responsibility of editors to shape both the career of young scientists and the funding of their host laboratories. To this end, we report a short story that we think is reminiscent of the parable of the mandarin. In *Le Père Goriot* by Honoré de Balzac, the hero asks “What would you do if you had the possibility to become instantaneously rich, under the sole condition that, by simply willing, without anybody knowing, you would kill a mandarin in China?” As you will see, some editors may find this a parable worth considering.

In September 2004, a PhD student and a postdoctoral fellow identified an insect neurohormone that had eluded scientists for more than 40 years. They were convinced that they had made a valuable discovery, after having read an editorial on the subject that was published the previous July in a major high-impact journal, hereafter referred to as MHJ. The editorial commented on an article published in a high-impact journal (HIJ-1), which claimed to have solved the problem, whereas our two researchers had their own evidence that things were more complicated. They consolidated their findings and submitted a paper to the MHJ on December 8.

On December 22, the researchers received notification from the editor who had written the editorial that their study

had not been given a high priority rating and would not be sent out for in-depth review. The editor did, however, indicate that the “finding may warrant consideration as a one-page article” in the MHJ, providing that the finding remained novel in that format. The two scientists reasoned “Better one page in the MHJ than four in another journal”, and their bosses naively agreed. They shortened their story to 800 words and resubmitted it on December 27. On January 13, the short manuscript was sent out for review. It was rejected on January 19, but the authors were only notified on January 25. The decision was essentially based on the opinion of one referee, who asked for a series of complementary experiments, which would obviously not fit in a short format. The bosses of the two researchers telephoned to convince the editor that this was unfair, and (s)he agreed to send the manuscript to additional referees. Oddly enough, the editor insisted that this ‘new’ manuscript—with the same text as before—would bear a new submission date of January 26.

On February 10, another high-impact journal (HIJ-2) published a paper from the group behind the original paper in HIJ-1. This paper was submitted on December 17 and accepted on December 31, and fully confirmed the results of our two researchers. On February 16, despite positive opinions from the additional referees, the MHJ editor rejected the short-format manuscript because novelty had now been compromised by the paper in HIJ-2. In the course of extensive email exchanges with the chief editor of the MHJ, the name of the initial negative referee was inadvertently revealed—it was somebody who the authors had asked to be excluded because of a potential conflict of interest.

Although we all accept the risk of being scooped by someone smarter or faster, we should not accept being treated in this way.

Even if the editor initially had doubts about the validity of the study, on February 10 (s)he should have known that it was correct, as it had been confirmed by the HIJ-2 paper. This left enough time to achieve quasi-simultaneous online publication. Unfortunately, there is no independent appeal system to correct such behaviour on the part of editors. The only option is to submit to another journal, which, after being scooped by a paper in HIJ-1, leaves only a low-impact journal (LIJ).

In addition to the unfair handling of the review process, this story illustrates how competition between high-impact journals for the publication of novel findings can degrade the quality of the peer-review process. Unfortunately, the consequences are more than mere frustration. The career prospects of a graduate student or a post-doctoral fellow will obviously differ depending on whether they have published a short article in an MHJ or a longer one in an LIJ. We may regret it, but the system of promotion in the academic world is essentially based on such criteria, and thus places enormous power and responsibility in the hands of editors. For the peer-review system to improve, editors should therefore do their part and adhere to good practice so as to justify scientists’ confidence in their judgement. It is no consolation to the two young researchers that they have become the mandarins of Balzac’s parable.

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