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# Editorial independence and the editor-owner relationship: Good editors never die, they just cross the line

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## ABSTRACT

**The concept of editorial freedom or independence is examined in the light of the editor-owner relationship. Like individual and national freedom or independence, it is a rhetorical concept whose realisation flows from internal achievement as much as it depends on external validation. This freedom entails roles and responsibilities embodied in specific codes of practice for editors, such as the guidelines espoused by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors and the World Association of Medical Editors. The calling to embody these guidelines makes editing a vocation that demands isolation and distancing, separation and solitude. It involves bracketing one's biases, prejudgments and preconceptions. With such detachment comes real freedom; one that requires a moral fibre and trustworthiness that uphold truth and right, whether in full view of public scrutiny, or in the aloneness of private secrecy. The stereotypical tension between academic and commercial concerns highlights the editor-owner relationship, and bears directly on editorial independence. In practice, journal owners overstep their prerogatives. The absence of clear contracts defining editorial independence and the lack of established mechanisms governing the editor-owner relationship affect many small- to medium-sized journals in developing countries. Even large journals in developed and democratic nations or totalitarian states and societies are not spared. At the end of the day, editorial freedom exists only insofar as it is tolerated, or until editors cross the line.**

**Keywords:** editorial freedom, editorial independence, editorial policies, editor-owner relationship

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## INTRODUCTION

A decade has passed since the dismissals of George Lundberg, editor of the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA), and Jerome Kassirer, editor of the New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM). The former's alleged dismissal "because of the publication of a single article was an obvious infringement of the journal's editorial independence," wrote the latter.<sup>(1)</sup> Seven months later, Kassirer was himself precipitously forced to depart following differences of opinion with the owners "over the use of the powerful brand name of the journal."<sup>(2)</sup> Of these incidents, Richard Smith, former editor of the British Medical Journal (BMJ), wrote:

"This central struggle undermines the relationship between the editor and the publisher, with the stereotype being a pure editor concerned with science and quality and a grasping publisher bothered purely with revenue and profit. Doctors will recognise this stereotype. It's similar to that of the doctor ethically committed to doing the best by an individual patient and the money driven manager trying to keep the hospital in budget (or in the United States, increase profits)".<sup>(2)</sup>

Three years ago, in 2006, John Hoey and Anne Marie Todkill, the two most senior editors of the Canadian Medical Association Journal (CMAJ), were fired by the journal's publisher, Graham Morris, over "irreconcilable differences" stemming back to an editorial addressing the appropriateness of legislation compelling physicians to staff Quebec emergency departments.<sup>(3)</sup> The members of the editorial board of the CMAJ wrote:

"We vigorously uphold the need for unequivocal editorial independence of CMAJ. We express our concern about the demand of the President of the organisation (of which many of us are members) concerning editorial retraction. As is evident ...

there is confusion about the relationship between the Canadian Medical Association, which owns and operates the journal, and the editorial content of the journal".<sup>(4)</sup>

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## EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE

Editorial freedom or independence is the concept that editors-in-chief should have full authority over the editorial content of their journal.<sup>(5)</sup> Like individual and national freedom or independence, it is a rhetorical concept whose realisation flows from internal achievement as much as it depends on external validation. From cover to cover, editors have the right “to decide what is published, what is not published, when items are published, and what (if any) amendments are made prior to publication,”<sup>(6)</sup> but they are constrained to “work within social, legal and ethical frameworks that circumscribe their freedom”<sup>(7)</sup> and make them accountable, “in different but interlocking ways, to their publishers, readers and contributors – and also to more abstract overseers: the medical profession, science and society.”<sup>(7)</sup>

This freedom entails roles and responsibilities (response-ability; the ability to respond) embodied in specific codes of practice for editors, such as the guidelines espoused by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) and the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME).<sup>(5,8)</sup> The calling to embody these guidelines makes editing, in effect, a vocation – a term that aptly describes burning both the “midnight oil” and the “candle at both ends” that all too familiarly mark the professional and personal life of any editor worth his or her salt. It also involves burning bridges, as the following lines convey:

“Medical journal editors walk a fine line. They must aspire to impartiality, open-mindedness, and intellectual honesty. They must try to select material for its merit, interest to readers, and originality alone. They also want their journals to have a voice and a personality. If they are doing their jobs well, they should give no favours, and they should have no friends.”<sup>(1)</sup>

Thus, in its purest sense, true editorial independence demands isolation and distancing, as “editors who make final decisions about manuscripts must have no personal, professional, or financial involvement in any of the issues they might judge.”<sup>(5)</sup> This self-imposed separation and solitude involves bracketing one’s biases, prejudgments and preconceptions to enable evaluation of the material at hand.

With such detachment (*contra* attachment) comes real freedom; to the extent that the editor is not beholden to person or power, office or opinion; he or she is free. Such freedom requires a moral fibre and trustworthiness that upholds truth and right, whether in full view of public scrutiny, or in the aloneness of private secrecy.

“Because medical editors bear some of the responsibility for the reliability of published research and, in turn, for the care of patients, the health of

the public, allocation of resources, and standards of medical ethics and professional behaviour, editors must be trustworthy. To preserve this trust, an editor must avoid giving favours, must not be beholden to any special-interest group, and must be willing to publish articles on controversial subjects, even if they involve the organisation that owns and publishes the journal.”<sup>(9)</sup>

## THE EDITOR-OWNER RELATIONSHIP

I would like to think that both editors and owners want their journals to succeed, albeit with different agendas. The stereotypical tension between academic and commercial concerns highlights this relationship, and bears directly on editorial independence. “Editors should base decisions on the validity of the work and its importance to the journal’s readers” and “not on the commercial success of the journal”, while “journal owners should not interfere in the evaluation; selection or editing of individual articles either directly or by creating an environment that strongly influences decisions.”<sup>(5)</sup>

“Publishing without reference to an owner’s goals requires a frank, truly independent editor. It also requires tolerant journal owners who believe unequivocally and irrevocably that complete editorial freedom is the only way to maintain integrity and command respect. In a recent email message, the distinguished professor of journalism Philip Meyer summed up this relationship: ‘As a general rule—and without reference to particular cases—it is neither illegal nor immoral for a publisher to keep an editor on a short leash. It’s just dumb.’”<sup>(1)</sup>

In practice, journal owners (professional associations, public or private institutions, or commercial corporations) overstep their prerogatives, imposing on those of the editor. The absence of clear contracts defining editorial independence, and the lack of established mechanisms governing the editor-owner relationship in many small- to medium-sized journals in developing countries do little to rectify the situation. Often, editorial appointments are coterminous with the appointing authority, with no provision for tenure. But as we have seen, even large journals in supposedly developed and democratic nations can be similarly situated, not to mention those in totalitarian states and societies.

At the end of the day, the freedom “to make editorial decisions independently of the ideological, strategic or commercial interests of the publisher,”<sup>(10)</sup> to publish controversial issues, even if these are at odds with the purpose, politics and practices of the body owning the journal<sup>(11)</sup> or “to express critical but responsible views about all aspects of medicine without fear of retribution, even if these views might conflict with the commercial

goals of the publisher<sup>2(5)</sup> exists only insofar as it is tolerated, or until editors cross the line.

As Ajai Singh, editor of *Mens Sana Monographs*, observed:<sup>(12)</sup>

- (1) Journals and editors, for all their uprightness and scientific merit, since they are under the thumb of associations and their office bearers, are always walking a tight rope. Whenever they appear inconvenient to the latter beyond a point, they will always be summarily dismissed.
- (2) The outcry, loud and impassioned, will as surely abate, because it lacks the teeth to convert its anger into collective action.
- (3) The editors will lose any battle in this fight, for the odds are stacked against them. This in spite of the fact that they are on the right side.
- (4) History will continue to repeat itself.

## CONCLUSION

Last year, Drs Matko and Ana Marusic, editors of the *Croatian Medical Journal*, were professionally intimidated and publicly reprimanded over editorial actions related to multiple allegations of plagiarism and duplicate publication against a retired professor, and the inappropriate handling of the matter by the University of Zagreb.<sup>(13,14)</sup> The Administrative Court of Croatia annulled the public reprimand, and the Croatian Helsinki Committee for Human Rights seconded its admonition over the violation of “human rights ... and ... dignity,” but the University has “neither apologised nor compensated Marusic.”<sup>(14)</sup>

“In the midst of the dispute, in March 2008, the Zagreb School of Medicine, one of four owners of the journal, sought to change its governance structure, striking the word “independent” from its governance document and allowing medical deans to appoint or dismiss members of its editorial board. The restructuring did not occur...”<sup>(14)</sup>

The Quixotic “concept of editorial freedom should be resolutely defended by editors even to the extent of their placing their positions at stake.”<sup>(5)</sup> *Pace* Singh, “every fight for editorial independence by upright editors, even when

they are sacked, is eventually for the good. For, in the wake of the outcry, managements have to spell out with greater clarity where and when they will intercede. This itself is a significant step... Ultimately, with every such action, although a battle in the form of an editor sacked is lost, the war for editorial independence is being won.”<sup>(12)</sup>

## DISCLOSURES

The author does not have any relevant relationships to disclose, aside from his professional and personal friendship with the Editor of the *Singapore Medical Journal*, Professor Wilfred CG Peh, who ends his term, in the author’s opinion, prematurely, with this issue. The views expressed are solely those of the author and do not reflect those of any journal or organisation with which he is associated.

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