Preprints.org

Article

Not peer-reviewed version

On the Thorny Issue of Single-Submission

Josephat U. Izunobi *

Posted Date: 23 May 2024

doi: 10.20944/preprints202405.1506.v1

Keywords: peer-review; publishing ethics; redundant publications; science communication; sequential submission

Preprints.org is a free multidiscipline platform providing preprint service that is dedicated to making early versions of research outputs permanently available and citable. Preprints posted at Preprints.org appear in Web of Science, Crossref, Google Scholar, Scilit, Europe PMC.

Copyright: This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Preprints.org (www.preprints.org) | NOT PEER-REVIEWED | Posted: 23 May 2024 doi:10.20944/preprints202405.1506.v1

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions, and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions, or products referred to in the content.

Article

On the Thorny Issue of Single-Submission

Josephat U. Izunobi

Department of Chemistry, University of Lagos, Akoka-Yaba, Lagos, Nigeria; jizunobi@unilag.edu.ng

Abstract: This article examines varying viewpoints on the single-submission policy in scientific publishing, which has recently come under attack. The rule permits the sequential, rather than simultaneous, submission of a manuscript to more than one journal and dictates that an author(s) must wait for a response from one journal before resubmitting the same work to another for consideration. A corollary is that legitimising multiple-submissions would create more problems than it could solve.

Keywords: peer-review; publishing ethics; redundant publications; science communication; sequential submission

---

The clamour for the abolition of the single-submission rule in scientific publishing appears to be becoming more vociferous [1–3]. The single-submission policy prohibits the simultaneous submission of a manuscript to multiple journals and dictates that an author(s) must wait for a response from one journal before they can submit their work to another [4]. This rule was devised to conserve the resources and time of journals and reviewers as well as protect the quality of scientific record; with peer-review as the key filter, to ensure that only validated, high-quality research is published and disseminated, one submission at a time [2,3]. Notably, several factors influence this requirement to submit manuscripts for publication sequentially rather than simultaneously, to different journals. These include: ethical, legal, business and reputational considerations [5].

It is noteworthy that chief amongst the concerns of the proponents of the abolishment of this rule include lengthy publication times, journals and reviewers' biases and the sometimes-seeming lack of pellucidity in the process [2,3]. Oftentimes, these complaints are tied to the peer-review system, which is generally regarded as the gold standard of scientific integrity and legitimacy, and geared towards assessing the quality, impact and accuracy of the hypothesis investigated [1,6].

Peer-review ensures that research is rigorously scrutinised by experts, with a view to maintaining the quality of published research [6,7]. It is designed to serve as a gauge for good science, filter flawed or prejudiced studies and act as a bastion of credibility for published works [1,3]. Essentially, the process of peer-review remains an indispensable tool for ensuring that the academic and research communities, stakeholders and public are only fed well-reasoned, evidence-based and methodologically sound information [6].

There is no gainsaying the fact that the major goals of publishing are knowledge-sharing and information dissemination; typically propelled by or fulcrumed on the betterment of humankind and society [8–10]. Other considerations, such as career progression, horn-tooting and financial gains, or even "one-upper syndrome," though somewhat germane, are secondary and should not be allowed to drive the narrative.

Firstly, to the issue of time-sensitive manuscripts, it is established fact that humans are governed by time and space, and that there is no iota of flippancy in the aphorism that "today's extraordinary is tomorrow's mundane" [11]. Consequently, it is also common knowledge that most reputable journals have facilities for the prompt dissemination of time-critical or seminal information; in appreciation of its value and exigency. It is undeniable, nonetheless, that the process can be occasionally subjective but that is a different discourse altogether. The overarching point, notwithstanding, is that a process is in place, and it would be counterintuitive for any journal worth its salt to "hoard" such papers [3]. That said, promptitude of reviews and expeditious publication are

© 2024 by the author(s). Distributed under a Creative Commons CC BY license.

Preprints.org (www.preprints.org) | NOT PEER-REVIEWED | Posted: 23 May 2024 doi:10.20944/preprints202405.1506.v1

grave ethical obligations that must be shouldered; in word and deed, by both publishers and journals with great solemnity and aplomb [12].

On the flipside, could the proverbial "one person's food is another's poison" be at play here? Is an author's "blockbuster," an editor's "bust"? Put differently, are authors overestimating the value of their work [13]? Perhaps, it is the Rashomon effect in action?... That word "subjectivity" again! It appears we cannot escape its nuances. Another possibility is that this is a manifestation of the publishing industry's variant of the Veblen effect; wherein "consumers" and "goods" are substituted with "authors" and "manuscripts," respectively. The Veblen effect defines a phenomenon where consumers perceive higher-priced goods to be better and of greater value than they actually are based on their costs [14]. In any case, it remains to be seen what the recently burgeoning preprint server and database services [15] as well as Open Access [16] hold in store. They appear to be veritable panaceas to the triune challenges of time-sensitive articles, unavailable expert reviewers and requisite author credits and citations, if properly managed [17].

It is incontrovertible that scholarly publishing, as currently is, still leaves room for improvement. It is, therefore, imperative that such drawbacks as dilatory response times, unreasonable delays, biases, opacities and dilettantish reviewers and editors must be tackled where they exist. Authors should also continually seek to improve their craft, eschew unethical behaviours and plagiarism, and be more intentional, where applicable. Most aptly, publishers and researchers alike must be wary of any attempts to "game the system" if the academic research enterprise is to maintain its integrity and accolades [10,18]. The prevailing proliferation of journals could also prove to be a malady [19,20].

This, in itself, is not necessarily disagreeable as it could be symptomatic of growth but could also be detrimental if left unregulated. The rise in the numbers of under/untrained reviewers and editors as well as unscrupulous activities [21,22] are ominous cases in point. Not forgetting the rampant threats of predatory journals [23] and journal-hijacks [24]. Pressing ahead, publishers should embrace and prioritize the training of their editors and reviewers [7], entrench best publishing practices and ethics as well as implement sustainable quality assurance and control protocols. Pedagogically, mandating courses in rudimentary publishing as compulsory for researchers and academics; since the dissemination of results is an intrinsic part of research, may help ameliorate the dearth of competent practitioners.

In truth, unwarranted delays in the publication of results can be frustrating, damaging and anti-career advancement but these circumstances are not the exclusive preserve of early-career researchers or under-represented demographic, as have been suggested [1–3]. More importantly, they are not wholly attributable to the single-submission policy. Neither is it right to blame the prohibition of multiple-submission for the apparent slow speed of disseminating research findings. It is also instructive to observe that although the origins of the single-submission rule are steeped in the pre-digital era and impelled by the onerous task of protecting copyrights, the automation of administrative and ancillary tasks in publishing, and possible overload of the peer-review system, are by no means responsible for its observance and continuance [5,25]. In the least, it remains a benchmark because it is fit for purpose.

Some opinions [1,2] suggest that multiple or simultaneous submissions; which can lead to double or multiple publications in two or more journals, can help authors garner diverse feedbacks from multiple sources and achieve maximum dissemination of their work. This may be true but juxtaposed against the fact that the inadvertent double-counting or inappropriate weighting of the results of a single study can distort available evidence [26] in medicine, for instance; it pales in rationale. Besides, duplicate publications arrogate undue advantage in academia where productivity is partly measured by number of publications [27]. It has also been argued that sequential submissions delay the dissemination of clinical research results, with attendant harmful effects on the health of patients [13].

It would be remiss, however, not to mention that the single-submission system has no safeguards against the resubmission elsewhere (by authors) of rejected, adequately-reviewed manuscripts without addressing the lacunae raised by expert reviewers [6]. This does not augur well for the art or its development. Markedly, single-submission advocates concede to the latter but are

Preprints.org (www.preprints.org) | NOT PEER-REVIEWED | Posted: 23 May 2024 doi:10.20944/preprints202405.1506.v1

quick to contend that such knowledge gaps, if fundamental, would be eventually found out by subsequent reviewers or journals. It does appear, therefore, that the benefits of the single-submission policy greatly outweigh the shortcomings [28].

Furthermore, it is tenable to posit that at the core of this non-/simultaneous submission debate, in scientific publishing, are time lapse and management [1,3,5]. Authors are required to wait for a decision from one journal before submitting to another and cannot stake one journal against another. Contrarily, in legal publishing, for example, where authors are allowed to submit a single manuscript to as many periodicals as possible, in order to increase their probability of acceptance, situations sometimes arise where lesser-known journals, in spite of their timely and robust review processes, are dismissed in favour of more esteemed journals [12]. This can be debilitating to new and intending publishers as well as exacerbate the imbalances of impact between upcoming and established journals thereby possibly opening the door to monopolistic tendencies in the industry [29].

Simplistically, supposing that an author, who is amenable to multiple-submission and journal-tiering, simultaneously submits an article to two or three relevant but different journals that complete reviews in 90 days and at the end of the peer-review process, two of the journals accept to publish the manuscript, does the author double-publish or withdraw the manuscript? And should the author choose one of the journals, how will the input of the other (rejected) journal(s) be reckoned? So, without overstating or fudging the issue, assuming that the aim for pushing for the abandonment of the single-submission rule is to reward the productivity of authors, as quickly as possible, as have been claimed [1–3], how does one, in equity, appreciate the resources and time expended by the journals (and reviewers) rejected by the author(s) after a rigorous peer-review process? Regardless, it is cogent to describe the simultaneous submission of an article to more than one journal as a poor and unsustainable management of scarce human resources and assert that, under the prevailing single-submission policy, these same resources could yield two or more different papers. In addition, there are knotty ethical issues around copyright ownership, ex-Open Access, amongst others [25,26,30], with simultaneous submissions.

In conclusion, the single-submission policy, like most human contrivances, may be considered suboptimal – quixotic even! – but it is the best we have got now and it suffices. It is, to a large extent, a foolproof, throughput, rigorous method of ensuring quality, probity and accountability as well as discouraging duplicity [5,31]. Significantly, most of the issues raised in support of lifting the multiple-submission ban are already replete with pragmatic solutions; some of which have been adduced [2,3] though no antidotes have been prescribed for the looming chaos in the event that the single-submission rule is abolished. A plausible avant-garde would be to require editorial boards to share information on manuscripts received but this is probably dead-on-arrival – with a few exceptions [26,30,32] – as publishers competing for patronage from prospective authors are unlikely to acquiesce. In my assessment, therefore, the points in support of the *status quo* [5,25,27] dwarf those against.

This system works; the "team" is still winning!... Why change it?

References

1. Ellen, N. Reevaluating the single submission rule in scholarly publishing. *A-Help*, 30 August 2023. https://academichelp.net/blog/academic-writing-tips/reevaluating-the-single-submission-rule-in-scholarly-publishing.html (accessed March 2024).
2. George, B. Academic asphyxiation: The inequitable expectation of 'serial monogamy' in manuscript submissions to scholarly journals. *Faculty Focus*, 30 August 2023. https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/academic-leadership/academic-asphyxiation-the-inequitable-expectation-of-serial-monogamy-in-manuscript-submissions-to-scholarly-journals/ (accessed March 2024).
3. Gruda, D. Dear journals: Stop hoarding our papers. *Nature Career Column*, 10 October 2023. https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-023-03196-y (accessed March 2024).
4. Epstein, S.; Nadler, P.; Lunney J. Multiple submission. *Science* **1982**, *217*, 686. DOI: 10.1126/science.217.4561.686.c
5. Wordvice, KH. All you need to know about simultaneous submissions. *Wordvice*, 3 July 2022. https://blog.wordvice.com/simultaneous-submissions/ (accessed March 2024).
6. Editorial. In praise of peer review. *Nat. Mater.* **2023**, *22*, 1047. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41563-023-01661-7

Preprints.org (www.preprints.org) | NOT PEER-REVIEWED | Posted: 23 May 2024 doi:10.20944/preprints202405.1506.v1

7. Patel, J. Why training and specialization is needed for peer review: A case study of peer review for randomized controlled trials. *BMC Med.* **2014**, *12*, 128; https://doi.org/10.1186/s12916-014-0128-z.
8. Mabe, M.A. Scholarly communication: A long view. *New Rev. Acad. Librariansh.* **2010**, *16*, 132–144. https://doi.org/10.1080/13614533.2010.512242
9. Hanson, B.; Sugden, A.; Alberts, B. Making data maximally available. *Science* **2011**, *331*, 649. DOI: 10.1126/science.1203354
10. Chan, W. What is the value of publishing? *ACS Nano* **2018**, *12*, 6345–6346. https://doi.org/10.1021/acsnano.8b05296
11. Grosman, L.; Raz, T.; Friesem, D.E. Tomorrow's mundane is today's extraordinary: A case study of a plastered installation during neolithization. *Humanit. Soc. Sci. Commun.* **2020**, *7*, 87; https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-020-00579-8
12. Yacoubian, Jr., G.S. Publishing in American legal and social science periodicals: An ethical comparison. *Learn. Publ.* **2005**, *18*, 275–278. https://doi.org/10.1087/095315105774648889
13. Torgerson, D.J.; Adamson, J.; Cockayne, S.; Dumville, J.; Petherick, E. Submission to multiple journals: A method of reducing time to publication? *BMJ* **2005**, *330*, 305–307. DOI: 10.1136/bmj.330.7486.305
14. Patsiaouras, G.; Fitchett, J.A. The evolution of conspicuous consumption. *J. Hist. Res. Mark.* **2012**, *4*, 154–176. https://doi.org/10.1108/17557501211195109
15. Van Noorden, R. The arXiv preprint server hits 1 million articles. *Nature*, 30 December 2014. https://doi.org/10.1038/nature.2014.16643
16. Stern, B.; Ancion, Z.; Björke, A.; Farley, A.; Qvenild, M.; Rieck, K.; Sondervan, J.; Rooryck, J.; Kiley, R.; Karatzia, M.; Papp, N. Plan S – Towards responsible publishing: A proposal from cOAlition S (*www.coalition-s.org*, 31 October 2023). DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.8398480
17. Vines, T. The dawn of the age of duplicate peer review. *Scholarly Kitchen*, 9 September 2021. https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2021/09/09/duplicate-peer-review/ (accessed March 2024).
18. Alberts, B.; White, R.M.; Shine, K. Scientific conduct. *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. U.S.A.* **1994**, *91*, 3479–3480. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.91.9.3479
19. Mabe, M. The growth and number of journals. *Serials* **2003**, *16*, 191–197. DOI: 10.1629/16191
20. Becker, R.C.; Cotarlan, V.; Sadayappan, S. The rapid proliferation of solicited content online journals: A quest to disseminate knowledge? *J. Thromb. Thrombolysis* **2019**, *47*, 337–344. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11239-019-01827-8
21. Ferguson, C.; Marcus, A.; Oransky, I. Publishing: The peer-review scam. *Nature* **2014**, *515*, 480–482. https://doi.org/10.1038/515480a
22. Van Noorden, R. How big is science's fake-paper problem? *Nature* **2023**, *623*, 466–467. https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-023-03464-x
23. Richtig, G.; Berger, M.; Lange-Asschenfeldt, B.; Aberer, W.; Richtig, E. Problems and challenges of predatory journals. *J. Eur. Acad. Dermatol. Venereol.* **2018**, *32*, 1441–1449. https://doi.org/10.1111/jdv.15039
24. Müller, S.D.; Sæbø, J.I. The 'hijacking' of the Scandinavian Journal of Information Systems: Implications for the information systems community. *Inf. Syst. J.* **2024**, *34*, 364–383. https://doi.org/10.1111/isj.12481
25. Wager, E. Why you should not submit your work to more than one journal at a time. *Afr. J. Trad. CAM.* **2010**, *7*, 160–161.
26. International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE). Recommendations for the conduct, reporting, editing, and publication of scholarly work in medical journals. 2024; pp. 9. (https://icmje.org/icmje-recommendations.pdf).
27. Wager, E. Why is redundant publication a problem? *Int. J. Occup. Environ. Med.* **2015**, *6*, 3–6. DOI: 10.15171/ijoem.2015.530
28. Izunobi, J.U. Submitting papers to several journals at once. *Nature* **2023**, *623*, 916. https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-023-03740-w
29. Kirby, A. The challenges of journal startup in the digital era. *Publications* **2015**, *3*, 219–231. https://doi.org/10.3390/publications3040219
30. Elsevier. Factsheet: Simultaneous submission. Elsevier, 2019 (Simultaneous-Submission-factsheet-March-2019.pdf).
31. Berenbaum, M.R. On peer review—then, now, and soon to be? *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. U.S.A.* **2023**, *120*, e2302593120. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2302593120
32. Clarke, M. Game of papers: ELife, BMC, PLOS and EMBO announce new peer review consortium. *Scholarly Kitchen*, 15 July 2013. https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2013/07/15/game-of-papers-elife-bmc-plos-and-embo-announce-new-peer-review-consortium/ (accessed March 2024).

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.