Ethical and Bioethical Foundations in the Communication of Scientific Knowledge

Fundamentos éticos y bioéticos en la comunicación del conocimiento científico

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Abstract

Publications presented by scientific journals serve as tools that can influence future decisions made by researchers and the broader community. Therefore, the ethical and bioethical considerations that must be taken into account when deciding whether to accept an article for publication lie in the quality of the manuscripts, which must ensure scientific, social, and ethical validity, guaranteeing fair, responsible, equitable, and technically competent review procedures. Contemporary ethical standards for publications require thorough verification of content, the prevention of plagiarism, the detection of data fabrication or falsification, and the exercise of responsible authorship. These steps must be accompanied by a review of ethical approvals from Research Ethics Committees (RECs) and the upholding of the ethical principles of research established in international standards. Editorial ethics, as an applied dimension of bioethics and knowledge management, requires upholding the trust of the academic community by demonstrating transparency, integrity, and the correction of errors to ensure the robustness of its publications. The increasing use of generative AI will be a forward-looking aspect to consider, necessitating the establishment of specific guidelines that limit scientific output strictly based on these tools.

Keywords: Bioethics; ethics of science; scientific journals; scientific communication.

Resumen

Las publicaciones presentadas por las revistas científicas se constituyen en instrumentos que pueden influir en decisiones futuras de los investigadores y la comunidad en general. Por lo tanto, los aspectos éticos y bioéticos que se deben presentar al momento de la decisión de aceptar un artículo para su publicación residen en la calidad de los documentos, en los cuales se deberán asegurar la validez científica, social y ética, garantizando procedimientos de revisión justos, responsables, equitativos y técnicamente competentes. Los estándares éticos contemporáneos de las publicaciones requieren una exhaustiva verificación del contenido, la prevención de plagio, la detección de fabricación o falsificación de datos y el ejercicio de una autoría responsable. Estos pasos deben acompañarse de la revisión de aprobaciones éticas de Comités de Ética de la Investigación (CEI), y la preservación de los principios éticos de investigación establecidos en normas internacionales. La ética editorial como una dimensión aplicada de la bioética y gestión del conocimiento requiere sustentar la confianza de la comunidad académica, mostrando transparencia, integridad y corrección de errores para brindar solidez a sus publicaciones. El uso progresivo de la IA generativa, será un aspecto proyectivo a considerar, estableciendo normas específicas que limiten la producción científica estrictamente basada en estas herramientas.

Palabras clave: Bioética; ética de la ciencia; revistas científicas; comunicación científica.

Introduction

Scientific journals are institutions that play a pivotal role in the presentation and dissemination of scientific knowledge. They constitute complex spaces where the management of information is evaluated, processed, and certified to ensure the credibility of content intended for visibility in physical or virtual media.

These institutions, protected by international standards of scientific writing, must guarantee that the documentation submitted for publication is coherent, truthful, and appropriate for the increasingly rigorous demands of science. In this sense, their existence is driven by epistemic, professional, social, and economic interests. Therefore, their operation should not be understood solely through the lens of bibliometric positioning, commercial interests, or selection and evaluation procedures, but rather as a series of activities where publishing specialists, trained subject-matter experts, research experts, copyeditors, proofreaders, peer reviewers, and authorities in editorial and scientific ethics interact to decide with authority which findings may be communicated—given that these findings can impact public policy, clinical decisions, and professional careers.

Scientific editing involves significant moral and scientific dimensions; consequently, its bioethical analysis warrants careful examination all the more so given the unchecked expansion of publications, new journals, social media platforms, and open-access scientific communications, alongside the intense pressure on professionals—particularly within academic environments—to publish and enhance the standing of their research centers within the scientific community." Given this landscape, occasional and precarious peer review processes, coupled with the proliferation of predatory journals, create significant conflicts for editors attempting to validate the information they disseminate.

The International Science Council (Tran, 2024) reports that over 10,000 research articles were retracted globally in 2023. This highlights an increase in scientific documentation containing fraudulent content, which naturally impacts the analysis of production and publication costs. More importantly, such publications exert a negative influence on other authors and may lead to errors in current or future research, thereby undermining scientific integrity and credibility.

The need to generate data and publish articles can affect the quality of research and lead to an increase in retractions, which has been estimated at 23% for the year 2023. This is a cause for concern among scientists and journal editors, who are increasingly observing a lack of data authenticity, while 16% of retracted papers showed that plagiarism was the second leading cause of retraction, and only 6% were due to errors in the research process (Tran, 2024).

As of 2026, Retraction Watch provides real-time monitoring of the most notable and evident retractions, including those of documents published in journals on the Clarivate Master Journal List. This process inevitably diminishes the impact factors and public credibility of these journals, as seen in cases where journals have artificially inflated their impact factors to attract authors and readers, or have refused to disclose information regarding specific concerns related to published documents or to demonstrate processes that validate their evaluation protocols. Investigations

into these matters revealed that approximately 85% of the journals scrutinized were removed from the list (Retraction Watch, 2026).

Added to all this is the increased circulation of preprints and the use of generative artificial intelligence in writing, drafting, reviewing, and editorial evaluation, as many authors use these tools to create documents and citations that do not exist or are unrelated to the subject matter of the study without disclosing their use during the production of the text (Flanagin *et al*., 2023; Ganjavi *et al*., 2024; Kocak, 2024).

Thus, editorial ethics should be understood as an act of shared responsibility among all participants in the research process, and not merely as the drafting of standardized guidelines for manuscript submission in the section intended for authors. In this process, Research Ethics Committees (RECs) play a fundamental role at the outset of all investigations by evaluating and assessing the researchers' design and procedures. They also ensure compliance with ethical research standards related to integrity, truthfulness, accountability, data protection, the appropriate use of data-collection tools, justice, and the bioethical principles established by Beauchamp and Childress. Thus, the ethical clearances issued by RECs constitute the first filter for research studies (Anguiano-Soto, 2016; Beauchamp & Childress, 2019; Moher *et al*., 2020; Morandin-Ahuerma, 2023).

From this perspective, scientific journals must fulfill the role of safeguarding published information. This involves evaluating the potential benefits of the articles alongside the potential harm that could arise from publications that fail to meet criteria for transparency, veracity, and potential conflicts of interest. Supported by the ethical approvals of RECs, this practice would significantly reduce conflicts regarding the procedural and analytical aspects of the results presented in potentially publishable manuscripts. It is worth noting that modern bioethics should not be bound by its traditional limitations within biomedical fields (The World Conferences on Research Integrity Foundation, 2024; The World Medical Association-WMA, n.d.); rather, it should expand its scope to all types of studies that involve, in any way, the biopsychosocial safety and respect for living beings.

The need for ethical evaluations in the publication of scientific articles should lead scientific journals to periodically review their criteria for peer review and manuscript submission by authors, rather than limiting themselves to a technical evaluation of the manuscript as a written work with the potential for publication. This can be achieved by re-analyzing the journal's regulatory frameworks, ensuring they are not reduced to rigid literary formats, but rather promote the institutionalization of practices related to editorial independence, conflict of interest management, methodological traceability, public correction of errors, and accountability for the potential effects of flawed or ethically questionable publications (Kelly *et al*., 2014).

Bioethics Applied to Scientific Editing

The bioethical principles originally established in 1978 by the Belmont Report (PAHO/WHO, 1980) and endorsed by Beauchamp and Childress in 1979 (Beauchamp & Childress, 2019)—namely autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice—are bioethical elements applicable to all types of research. Although these principles originated within a clinical-medical perspective, the breadth of their conceptual framework has allowed their application across various technical and social fields.

Its application in research ethics can be seen in the verification of informed consent in studies involving human subjects and social research, as well as in the manner in which research addresses data confidentiality and the use of information; the reasonable and respectful use of data; the study-specific collection and use of data; and transparency in research submitted for publication—all of which, in summary, embody the principle of autonomy.

The principle of beneficence is reflected in the relevance of the study to society or to scientific development, the reliability of the presented information, and the novelty and advancement of knowledge supported by sound research techniques. Non-maleficence, on the other hand, is framed within the editors' obligation to prevent harm resulting from publications containing misleading information or ethically reprehensible research conduct. This includes avoiding post-research damages that affect society or the groups of people involved in the study, preventing sensationalized information, and rejecting unclear research methodologies that lack valid ethical approvals.

Justice in scientific publishing demands the equitable distribution of research benefits and burdens, such as providing fair opportunities to authors and ensuring appropriate academic recognition, as well as the retraction of articles with credibility issues in either their procedures or results.

When evaluating a manuscript editorially, these four principles do not operate in isolation; their conjunction shapes the analysis of information. For instance, autonomy without justice can lead to the error of exclusively valuing formal documentary compliance. Non-maleficence without justice can result in the perpetuation of publishing errors by failing to publicly acknowledge problems within a study's procedures or results. Likewise, justice without editorial independence can manifest as forms of authoritarianism that lack inclusivity.

When analyzing editorial bioethics, the phrasing and content of journal policies must be contextualized so that

the presentation of ethical terms is not merely rhetorical but measurable through clear requirements for authors. Within this framework, the mandatory submission of ethical clearances must be thoroughly evaluated based on the type of publications accepted by the scientific journal. Consequently, ethical review must not be limited strictly to plagiarism or the misuse of generative AI tools. Instead, it must encompass the coherence of the study regarding its social relevance, scientific validity, and sampling selection principles, ensuring that autonomy, equitable sample selection, and informed consent are conscientiously evaluated (Arango-Bayer, 2008; Bustamante Cabrera, 2025).

Similarly, the disclosure of conflicts of interest, data protection measures, and the presentation of reporting guidelines and raw datasets are indispensable for ensuring that peer reviewers gain a clear understanding of the study's content and the procedures performed.

It is evident, however, that not all peer reviewers possess formal training in the ethical review of research, as their expertise generally leans toward technical and investigative methodologies. Consequently, the involvement of RECs is critical to reviewing the outcomes of an investigation before, during, and after its execution—effectively validating the presented results prior to their submission to a journal for publication. By doing so, editors can alleviate their administrative and review burdens, relying on an ethical clearance that backs the informational content of the manuscript under consideration.

Other elements to consider are research ethics and academic integrity, which many professionals treat as equivalent terms despite significant conceptual differences. The former addresses the protection of research participants—including communities, individuals, animals, and institutional or personal data that could be directly or indirectly affected by the study. The latter, conversely, focuses on the honesty, accountability, and reliability of the study and the researcher's procedures. While both concepts are deeply interrelated, it must be noted that a study may hold procedural ethical approval yet still engage in questionable practices such as improper authorship, statistical manipulation, redundant publication, or data misuse. Conversely, a study might maintain extreme rigor in its investigative execution while failing to uphold fundamental ethical principles during data collection or dissemination (Kang & Hwang, 2020; Muthanna *et al.*, 2024).

Bioethics in publishing is not limited to the presentation of results, but also involves addressing the consequences of improperly evaluated publications—a role that takes on substantial importance in the case of systematic reviews, guidelines, or public policy decisions based on available knowledge and information. In this way, editors and journals become temporary custodians of scientific information, which in turn becomes a public good.

The Scientific Journal as a Moral Custodian of Knowledge

The historical importance of scientific journals stems from their role in disseminating scientific evidence across all fields of knowledge. To achieve this, journals define publication standards, length, typography and proofreading requirements, the selection of competent reviewers, and the critical evaluation of submitted manuscripts, as well as recommending modifications for those potentially significant to the academic community.

The moral integrity of its members and the reliability of its document selection will have a significant impact on the reputation of institutions and researchers, the allocation of resources, and the development of public policies. Thus, the moral authority bestowed upon a journal by researchers depends not only on its impact factor but also on the processes developed to ensure the appropriate selection of information to be disseminated; similarly, any failure in these processes undermines the journal's credibility and, naturally, the credibility of the information contained in its publications.

It is also considered that journals serve as a temporary certification body, meaning that what is published in their pages is neither an absolute nor definitive truth, and they serve as a forum where authors present proposals subject to review, rebuttal, discussion, and, if necessary, correction or retraction. For these reasons, the editors of academic journals must include post-publication mechanisms—such as letters to the editor, comments, corrections, retractions, and updates—as part of their internal ethical conduct assessment process.

In this regard, many journals have aligned with the guidelines of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), which establish codes of ethical responsibility for authors, editorial board members, and reviewers (Committee on Publication Ethics, 2023). These guidelines mandate specific journal actions when addressing errors resulting from negligence rather than deliberate fraud.

Ethically, editorial responses to verified issues in submitted manuscripts or peer-review errors must be proportional to the severity of the infraction. Thus, not every erratum justifies a retraction; however, when a conclusion or provided dataset is deemed unreliable, it demands a visible corrective response. Along this path, the trust that editors place in manuscripts submitted for review or publication must align with the necessary ethical and technical standards. That is, it rests on the premise that presenting data to the community

is the central axis of all scholarship. Nevertheless, editors must also recognize that researchers are fallible human beings capable of committing unintentional errors, and journals have a moral obligation to detect these flaws, propose corrections, or present their observations to the authors.

In this way, everything published in the journal's history becomes a repository and historical record of aspects of science; when indexed and cited, this record is preserved over time and can serve as the basis for future decisions—whether appropriate or inappropriate—such that an inadequate review can result in cumulative harm, especially if the article has been reviewed and repeatedly cited.

Scientific Integrity and Intellectual Honesty

When reviewing a manuscript submitted for publication, it is presumed that the document has been developed honestly, adhering to scientific methodological rigor throughout all processes and data presentation, and respecting bioethical principles in cases involving research with living beings, communities, and vulnerable groups. Scientific integrity is, therefore, the primary editorial presumption upon receiving a document deemed eligible for publication (Zhaksylyk *et al*., 2023).

On the other hand, intellectual honesty is understood as the moral commitment of a scientist or professional to present truthful information. This implies that they have not modified the protocol during the study to induce specific outcomes; have not engaged in data dredging (or p-hacking) to achieve statistically significant results; have not concealed failed trials; have not divided data derived from a single study to present fragmented results (salami slicing); have not made undisclosed changes to the research design; and have not constructed unjustified causalities (Adams, 2022; Stefan & Schönbrodt, 2023).

The responsibility of editors should focus on creating incentives to reduce dishonest practices by requesting the submission of or access to raw data, conducting exhaustive methodological reviews, and requiring explicit declarations of originality and non-duplicity of information. This approach can be exemplified by the mandatory registration of research protocols in repositories such as PROSPERO, COCHRANE, or the CONSORT 2025 guidelines for specific types of studies (Hopewell *et al*., 2025).

Editors, in turn, must carefully review the articles submitted to them, as there are many factors that contribute to poor research practices, such as institutional pressure to publish, the commodification of metrics, competition for funding, and others. In this regard, the Hong Kong Principles propose evaluating researchers based on responsible practices, diversity of contributions, and metrics of recognition independent of traditional scientific publishing or academic positioning. The goal is to value the credibility and scientific validity of publications; however, while this forms a highly holistic approach to assessment, it must always be accompanied by a rigorous technical evaluation of the study itself (Moher *et al*., 2020).

Author Contribution and Conflicts of Interest

A recurring point of discussion among scholars is the precise degree of academic contribution to a manuscript, as ghost authors or contributors who did not actively support the research are frequently designated as co-authors or primary authors of a work. The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) and the CRediT taxonomy, standardized by the National Information Standards Organization (NISO), allow author roles to be defined within specific, structured parameters. While this framework does not entirely guarantee that the report submitted by researchers is thoroughly truthful, it does ensure that the journal complies with standards grounded in informant honesty and the public disclosure of accountability.

In light of the growing use of generative AI in scientific writing, COPE, the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME), Science, and JAMA have argued that AI systems lack moral agency because they bear no legal responsibility for their consequences; therefore, disclosures regarding their use must also specify the portions of the content that were generated by AI and include verification by peer reviewers that the content was not produced by AI (de Vito, 2023; Thorp, 2023).

Conflicts of interest represent another critical ethical dilemma capable of introducing bias into the research design, data analysis, interpretation, peer review, and final editorial decisions. These conflicts may stem from personal relationships, financial ties, academic rivalries, or social and political commitments, among other factors. Declaring a conflict of interest does not imply endorsement of the actions of all members; it is the editor's responsibility to determine the appropriate course of action by reviewing the affiliations of the authors, reviewers, and institutions involved in the study, or by requesting an independent review by experts in specific subject areas.

This does not mean that all institutions engage in conflicts of interest with their researchers to present results that favor them—and vice versa—or that not all reviewers and editors must continually recuse themselves because a colleague, friend, or student is involved in a research project, nor does it clearly rule out certain inclusions—such as those imposed by some superiors—or exclusions of authors who are not mentioned, as occurs in ghost authorship; these are situations that may not be identified by the editor or editorial board and are unlikely to be proven (Torre *et al*., 2025).

Fair and Transparent Review, Confidentiality, and Bias

Peer review is a process through which scientific articles pass to control the validity of the information presented in studies, thus constituting a system of scientific community control. However, these reviews provide no absolute guarantee of quality, given that human fallibility can unintentionally lead to bias in research assessment.

Although COPE establishes specific guidelines requiring peer reviewers to maintain transparency throughout their evaluation—including the disclosure of conflicts of interest and their competence in the assigned topic—and attempts to reduce methodological quality issues while protecting readers from erroneous results, conclusions, or information.

Despite these guidelines, there are undeniable disparities in the manner and quality of evaluation depending on the journal type, language, country of origin, editorial experience, and the expertise of both authors and reviewers within each discipline. Ethically, open peer review and anonymized review represent pertinent strategies that mitigate certain biases when rendering judgment on manuscript content, as does the diversification of reviewer databases. Journals must justify the rationale behind their chosen peer-review model, which should be clearly described in the editorial policies alongside the minimum and maximum turnaround times for completing document evaluations. This transparency is necessary to prevent, as much as possible, delays in delivering comments or decisions that could cause authors to lose confidence in the journal's credibility.

Furthermore, peer reviewers should regularly undergo training in editorial ethics to limit discriminatory remarks, unfounded objections, or aggressive commentary. Such training also helps standardize the textual presentation of responses and observations communicated to authors (Camadro, 2023; Candal-Pedreira *et al*., 2023).

Finally, an issue frequently encountered by authors is the lack of responsiveness from editors or the rejection of a manuscript without any disclosure of the reasons for its withdrawal. This practice can discourage many researchers, leading them to abandon their intention to publish altogether.

Retractions and Corrections

Editorial ethical responsibility does not conclude with the publication of a scientific article, which is instead the moment when reader feedback can give rise to a new cycle of editorial review and analysis.

In this way, editors may receive observations about a published document containing errors that do not affect the conclusions, requiring an immediate public correction of the document. On the other hand, if errors provide evidence of failure in research procedure, casting doubt on the results, or if plagiarism, redundant publication, or ethical compromise in data handling is identified, the document must be retracted publicly, warning readers about the findings that invalidate the published study (Tur, 2022).

Ethically, this information should be displayed quickly and clearly with a link to the original article, indicating who retracts the paper, the reasons for the decision, and preserving the data record. In this manner, researchers finding the article online will also learn that it has been retracted and should not be used as a reliable bibliographical source

Conclusions

Contemporary ethics in scientific journal editing faces numerous challenges that require fair, equitable, and, above all, public solutions. These measures must reduce the likelihood of publishing flawed manuscripts that could undermine scientific credibility or interfere with the outcomes of other studies, public policies, and societal decision-making.

Key issues to consider include the acceleration of scientific production, the widespread use of preprints, and the reliance on social media and digital platforms to disseminate results that have not undergone adequate evaluation. This challenge is closely tied to the overproduction of scientific information and the scarcity of trained reviewers capable of keeping pace with this substantial volume of data.

Similarly, evaluating manuscripts and verifying data integrity within digital environments—encompassing the use of AI, source code, and repositories—presents a growing challenge. The FAIR principles (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, and Reusable) established in 2016 constitute an integral part of editorial ethics; however, they must be applied carefully concerning privacy, community ownership, and contexts that lack a robust editorial infrastructure. Alongside this, journals must ensure they do not misinform the scientific community by utilizing clear, unambiguous language and maintaining high linguistic quality across all components of a study, thereby securing the reliability of the information and, consequently, public trust in science.

Finally, journals must promote responsible digital practices, reduce unnecessary bureaucratic demands, and consider the environmental impact associated with the use of AI and quantum computing. By adopting a prudent and accountable discourse, editorial teams can actively contribute to a framework of sustainable science.

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