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Anonymous editorials in biomedical research journals: Few in number but potentially problematic

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Key points:

- Editorials are typically brief comments by a journal's chief editor or associate editors on journal news, study findings, or trends in science or practice.
- Anonymous editorials, which account for 1%–3% of editorials indexed in PubMed, are those in which the author's name is absent or replaced by the journal's name.
- Chief editors cannot be assumed to be the authors of anonymous editorials, which causes multiple issues.
- Anonymous editorials prevent readers from assessing the author's potential conflicts of interest and their credibility for discussing the editorial's topic.
- Anonymous editorials also make credit and accountability for ideas in editorials difficult to establish and increase likelihood of authorship misattribution.
- This article proposes that editorials be published with the names, affiliations, and potential conflicts of interests of the individuals who author them.

Keywords: academic publishing, authorship, editorial

Editorials are a common article type in biomedical research journals. Editorials are usually brief comments by the journal's chief editor or associate editors on journal news (e.g., submission policies, impact factor), findings from new studies, or broader trends in research or medical practice. Editorials are a way for editors to communicate directly with readers. Thus, editorials serve an important function in academic publishing, and their integrity should be maintained.

During my research on letters to the editor in biomedical journals (Nuzzo, 2021b), I observed, but did not quantify, cases in which editorials were published without an author name or were published with the journal's name as the author name (what I call 'anonymous authorship' or 'ambiguous authorship'). Yet, I could find no previous discussions about anonymous editorials and their potential implications in academic literature. Therefore, the

purpose of the current paper is to present preliminary evidence and examples of anonymous editorials and argue that they are potentially problematic.

PREVALENCE OF ANONYMOUS EDITORIALS

On 1 March 2023, I searched the 'editorial' article type in PubMed for each of the following years: 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2022. The text entered into the search box was, for example: 2018/01/01:2018/12/31[dp]. The search identified 32,798, 34,148, 41,161, 40,536, and 40,717 editorials for 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2022, respectively. The search results for each year were then organized in ascending order (starting from January) and the first 10,000 editorials published that year were

downloaded from PubMed as a csv file. Then, the search was reorganized in descending order (starting from December) and the last 10,000 editorials from that year were also downloaded in a csv file. Data from the two files were then combined into one spreadsheet and submitted to analysis. Thus, 20,000 editorials were examined for each year (100,000 editorials in total across 5 years).¹ Overall, approximately 1%–3% of editorials indexed in PubMed each year exhibit anonymous or ambiguous authorship (Table 1). *Lancet* and *Nature* journals are the greatest contributors to anonymous or ambiguous editorial authorship. From 2018 to 2022, the prevalence of anonymous editorials progressively decreased.

Because author indexing is problematic for some items indexed in PubMed (e.g., letters) (Nuzzo, 2021b), the editorials from 2022 were then submitted to further analysis to confirm prevalence rates of anonymous editorials. Of the 471 editorials from 2022, a total of 59 were excluded from this further analysis for the following reasons: author unable to access the editorial (29 items); editorial not published in English (14 items); content in the article was clearly not authored by an editor (e.g., letter to the editor, interview, conference proceedings) (16 items). Thus, 412 of the editorials from 2022 were submitted to further analysis. Of these editorials, 250 (60.7%) were opinion-style editorials, and 162 (39.3%) were announcements from the editor or editorial office (e.g., award announcements; conference announcements; reviewer recognition; 'in this issue' summaries; concerns about data published in the journal; obituaries; and announcements or descriptions about journal history, policies, and metrics).

Of the 250 opinion-style editorials, 26 (10.4%) had an author's name listed in the print version of the editorial, though no author name was indexed in PubMed. The remaining 224 (89.6%) opinion-style editorials did not have an author name listed in the print version of the editorial: 127 had the journal's name listed as the author; 4 had 'editorial office' or 'the editors' listed as the author; 4 had an organization's name listed as the author; and 89 had nothing listed. Of these 250 opinion-style editorials, 242 (96.8%) did not include a funding or conflict of interest statement.

Of the 162 announcement editorials, 61 (37.7%) had an author's name listed in the print version of the editorial, though no author name was indexed in PubMed. The remaining 101 (62.3%) of the announcement editorials did not have an

author name listed in the print version of the editorial: 20 had 'editorial board', 'editorial office', 'editorial team' or 'the editors' listed as the author, and 81 had nothing listed. Of these 162 announcement editorials, 151 (93.2%) did not include a funding or conflict of interest statement.

Thus, of the 412 opinion-style and announcement editorials from 2022, 325 (78.9%) did not have individual editor names presented in the author list. These 325 anonymous editorials accounted for 1.6% of all editorials indexed in PubMed for 2022. Finally, a total of 401 (97.3%) of the opinion-style and announcement editorials did not include a funding or conflict of interest statement.

PROBLEMS OF ANONYMOUS EDITORIALS

In my opinion, anonymous editorials are problematic for a few reasons—all of which stem from the inability to attribute authorship to a given individual(s). First, anonymous editorials prevent readers from being able to assess an author's potential conflict of interest related to the ideas in the editorial. As the analysis of the editorials from 2022 showed, 97% of opinion-style and announcement editorials with anonymous or ambiguous authorship did not include a funding or conflict of interest statement. This was particularly apparent in the opinion-style editorials published in *Lancet* and *Nature* journals. The inability to evaluate potential conflict of interest does not align with standard publishing ethics, including publishing practices recommended by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (International Committee of Medical Journal Editors, 2019). Also, the definition of conflict of interest is sometimes broadened to encapsulate scenarios in which an author has an invested interest in a particular topic, even if a more traditional conflict of interest is lacking (Baveye, 2023). This definition of conflict of interest would likely include many editors, as they are often senior-level academics invested in a research area.

Second, anonymous editorials prevent readers from being able to determine the author's credibility related to the topic discussed. One example of this comes from an anonymous editorial published on obesity and weight stigma in *The Lancet Public Health* (PMID: 30954135) (The Lancet Public Health, 2019). In the editorial, the author stated that '[obesity] can still too often be regarded by some as an individual responsibility resulting from poor choices and motivations' and that the 'stereotypical perception that people with overweight and obesity are somehow responsible for their weight remains pervasive' (The Lancet Public Health, 2019). However, this view of body weight management is questionable, because the vast majority of credentialed health professionals (i.e., medical doctors, nurses, pharmacists, dietitians, nutritionists, exercise physiologists, personal trainers, physical therapists) believe that individuals *do* have the capacity to make choices to control their own body weight (Bleich et al., 2012, 2015). Yet, the editorial was published without the author's name. It was signed 'The Lancet Public Health', and PubMed listed the journal's name in place of the author's name.

¹PubMed limits the number of downloadable items in a spreadsheet to 10,000. Searches can be performed over shorter periods in a given year to yield smaller numbers of items which can then be separately downloaded and combined. However, I experienced various difficulties in attempting to have PubMed limit searches to specific dates within a year, such that 12 separate searches for every month would yield substantially more total editorials than when the entire year was searched at once. This occurred because PubMed was, for some reason, not able to stay within the monthly date limits and was thus generating thousands of duplicates. The reverse sort strategy used in the current paper is recommended by PubMed administrators for navigating searches with more than 10,000 results (<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/help/#10k-results>).

TABLE 1 Numbers of editorials indexed in PubMed with anonymous or ambiguous authorship.

Journal category	Year of publication									
	2018		2019		2020		2021		2022	
	<i>n</i>	Rate	<i>n</i>	Rate	<i>n</i>	Rate	<i>n</i>	Rate	<i>n</i>	Rate
All journals	640	3.20%	618	3.09%	535	2.68%	481	2.14%	471	2.35%
<i>Lancet</i> journals	171	0.86%	168	0.84%	129	0.65%	112	0.56%	120	0.60%
<i>Nature</i> journals	153	0.77%	155	0.78%	122	0.61%	106	0.53%	99	0.50%
All other journals	316	1.58%	295	1.48%	284	1.42%	263	1.32%	252	1.26%

Note: Rates calculated as the number of anonymous editorials divided by the number of editorials examined for that year (i.e., 20,000 editorials). Rates in the table overestimate the number of editorials without the author's name because PubMed sometimes does not index an author's name even when the author's name appears in the print version of the editorial (see text for more details).

Consequently, readers have no way of determining the credibility or authority of the author speaking on the topic.

Third, anonymous editorials make direct attribution of an idea to a particular individual difficult or impossible to establish. Thus, if an author of an anonymous editorial puts forward a novel or otherwise citable idea, the historical origins of that idea become less clear than if the author's name was known. Attribution of an idea is also relevant for editorials whose content might be deemed questionable even when the author has adequate experience and/or credentials. An anonymous editorial that was deemed questionable by many readers was published in *Nature Human Behaviour* on 18 August 2022 and titled 'Science must respect the dignity and rights of all humans' (PMID: 35982164) (Anonymous editorial, 2022). Though the title is agreeable, the statements made within the editorial were questioned by scientists and social commentators (Winegard, 2022). The editorial garnered significant attention on social media, and as of 31 October 2022, the editorial had been 'accessed' 56,000 times on the journal's website. Yet, an author name was not published with the editorial. PubMed indexed the editorial as 'No authors listed'. Moreover, because *Nature Human Behaviour* has multiple senior editors, the author's identity could not be assumed to be solely that of the chief editor. The author's identity only became apparent on August 23 when Stavroula Kousta, the chief editor of the journal, identified herself on Twitter (@KoustaStavroula) as the author. Finally, although the editorial by Kousta was questioned by many readers, what is deemed questionable will be a matter of a reader's knowledge and opinion. Therefore, even if an editorial contains content that most readers find mundane or uncontroversial (e.g., editorial update on a journal's impact factor or submission policies), some readers might still want to comment on such topics, and in doing so, they should know the name of the editor who authored the editorial to provide the proper context for addressing the editor.

Fourth, anonymous editorials have potential to increase the likelihood of misattribution of authorship. For example, when a journal's name is listed as the author name, what exactly does that mean? Does that mean that *all* editors at the journal authored and/or signed off on the editorial? In previous decades, with fewer editors and less frequent arrangements of co-chief editors or the like, an editorial published without an author would have perhaps implied that it was written by the journal's chief

editor. However, in contemporary academic publishing, journals sometimes have co-chief editors (e.g., *Medical Care*, *European Journal of Applied Physiology*), and the vast majority of journals have multiple section or associate editors. These editors can also write editorials, so one cannot assume that the author of an anonymous editorial is a sole chief editor. With the above-mentioned editorial published in *Nature Human Behaviour*, prior to Kousta claiming authorship on Twitter, one could have easily thought that all editors of the journal authored or approved of the work, consequently misattributing Kousta's ideas to others. Moreover, a reader should not have to independently investigate social media accounts or journal webpages of editorial board members to try to determine who the author of an editorial is.

Fifth, anonymous editorials also have potential to increase uncertainty regarding who to cite as the author. This issue becomes further complicated in cases like that of the editorial published in *Nature Human Behaviour*. One might argue that Kousta should be cited as the author, given her statement of authorship on Twitter. However, one might also argue that the editorial should be cited without an author name, because this is how the editorial was originally published and is currently indexed, and those who discover the editorial outside of the context of Twitter will not know that Kousta is the author.

SOLUTIONS TO FIX ANONYMOUS EDITORIALS

The solution to fix the problem of anonymous editorials is simple: editorials should be published with the names, affiliations, and conflicts of interest of the editors who write them. All of the above issues can be avoided if this guideline is adhered to. Organizations such as the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors are encouraged to adopt this guideline and comment more broadly on the topic of anonymous editorials and publishing ethics. The overall purpose of these recommendations is to help maintain the integrity of the editorial article type. More specifically, adoption of this standard would enable readers to assess the author's potential conflicts of interest and their credentials for discussing the topic in the editorial. This standard would also help to make crediting and

accounting for ideas in editorials easier to establish, decrease the likelihood of authorship misattribution, and make citing editorials easier and more accurate.

LIMITATIONS AND OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

The number of editorials published with anonymous or ambiguous authorship is relatively small (1%–3% of all editorials). Thus, one might argue that anonymous editorials are likely to have minimal impact and do not warrant much attention. However, several issues exist with this line of argumentation. First, the total number of editorials examined here was capped at 20,000 per year from 2018 to 2022, and only one database was searched. Thus, when searches are not capped at 20,000 per year, and when searches are expanded by numbers of years, databases, and scientific disciplines, the *absolute numbers* of anonymous editorials will be larger, though prevalence rates might be the same across these factors. Second, the numbers of editorials published anonymously in the future could increase, decrease, or stay the same. To discourage their future use, guidelines can be developed by associations of journal editors and then adopted by journal publishers. Third, non-quantitative aspects of anonymous editorials should also be discussed when considering their potential impact. For example, the current analysis revealed that *Lancet* and *Nature* journals were the largest contributors to anonymous editorials. *Lancet* and *Nature* journals have long been considered prestigious and leading research journals with wide academic readerships. Thus, any problems that arise from anonymous editorials could perhaps be magnified when published in these journals compared to other journals. Fourth, the line of argumentation that says that anonymous editorials are perhaps of minimal consequence due to their small numbers still does not address the fundamental issues described above related to publishing ethics (e.g., assessment of conflict of interest). Just as original research articles should not be published anonymously for the same reasons, neither should editorials.

One might also argue that anonymous or ambiguous authorship of editorials should be permitted because listing the names of all editors who co-author or sign-off on an editorial will cause authorship inflation. Authorship inflation (Knudson, 2011; Nuzzo, 2021a; Papatheodorou et al., 2008) and honorary authorship (Al-Herz et al., 2014; Flanagan et al., 1998) are legitimate concerns within academic publishing across various article types. However, a journal signature rather than an author signature still conceals potential conflicts of interest. Thus, a solution to the potential issue of authorship inflation from such editorials is to establish high standards for what constitutes authorship. In cases where the author of an editorial (e.g., the chief editor) receives feedback from other editors, the other editors can be listed in an acknowledgments section at the end of the editorial.

Finally, the analysis of editorials from 2022 revealed that PubMed sometimes does not index an editor's name, though the editor's name is listed in the print version of the editorial. This occurred with 87 (21.1%) of the editorials from 2022, and it occurred more often in announcement editorials than opinion-based editorials. Author indexing is known to be a problem for

some article types in PubMed (Nuzzo, 2021b). Thus, future research on anonymous editorials in biomedical research will probably need to account for this limitation by similarly examining the print versions of editorials or by multiplying prevalence rates by a correction factor (i.e., ~80% of all editorials indexed in PubMed without an author's name can be assumed to *not* have the author's name listed in the print version of the editorial).

CONCLUSION

Anonymous editorials are editorials in which the author's name is either entirely absent from the article or replaced by the journal's name. Anonymous or ambiguous editorials comprise approximately 1%–3% of all editorials indexed in PubMed. Because authorship by the chief editor cannot be assumed for editorials, *anonymous* editorials make direct attribution of an idea to a particular editor difficult or impossible to establish. Anonymous editorials are potentially problematic because they do not enable readers to evaluate the author's potential conflicts of interest and their credibility for discussing the topic in the editorial. Anonymous editorials are also potentially problematic because they make credit and accountability for ideas in editorials difficult to establish, increase the likelihood of authorship misattribution, and make citing the editorial more difficult and inaccurate. The solution to anonymous editorials issue is to require that the names, affiliations, and potential conflicts of interest of editors be published with editorials. Future original research can expand upon the preliminary findings on prevalence rates of anonymous editorials presented here and study a larger pool of editorials across a range of scientific disciplines.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

JLN conceived of the paper idea; collected and analyzed the data; and wrote, edited, and approved of all drafts of the paper.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings for this study are available in spreadsheet form at the Open Science Framework (<https://osf.io/gxv2r/>).

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