Scientific editing and scholarly publishing in Bangladesh: a personal journey

Hasan Shareef Ahmed
Chief of Editing and Publication, Research and Evaluation Division, BRAC, 75 Mohakhali, Dhaka 1212, Bangladesh
shareef.ha@brac.net

Scientific research and learned publishing are becoming increasingly important, with journal editors playing a crucial role. Acquiring editing skills is a life-long process, particularly for editors from Bangladesh and other developing countries. There is no any recognised course on science editing or publishing, and science editing is still not recognised as a profession in Bangladesh.

Most editors in the developing world enhance their skills through learning by doing. These editors have a passion for editing, an invisible and thankless job. The editors spend their lives nurturing science editing and publishing. This is reminiscent of poets' love for writing or novelists' love for creating novels. In the long-run it gives them fame, prestige, honour and income for survival. The question arises as to why some choose science editing as a profession? Here is the right place to quote the President of the Academy of Medical Sciences of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Prof. Izet Masic "The most encouraging aspects of being an editor are respect and honour, which can be achieved by devoted and highly professional or qualified work". Nonetheless, science editing as a profession cannot flourish without a career path, continuous education and financial incentives.

The role of journal publishing in developing countries cannot be ignored. Scholarly publishing has flourished in Bangladesh in the past few years. Currently 150 English scientific journals are published in this country. Unfortunately, most of these journals are still published irregularly, without proper design, peer review or correct editing. A study on peer review in Bangladesh revealed that the authors appreciate the need of effective peer review. However, it also indicated that the effectiveness of peer review in most Bangladeshi journals is unacceptable. Another study noted that 68% of the examined Bangladeshi journals published late, 30% had inconsistencies and 86% were not indexed. Most of the journals do not reach their target audience. Latest journal issues are usually not available in libraries. The need for proper editing and peer review is well understood by most authors, but a quarter of the respondents question the reliance of local publications on peer review. Poor quality writing, unavailability of skilled referees and low effectiveness of peer review are among the major threats to scholarly publishing in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh Journals Online (Bangladesh Journals Online) has been established to promote local journals. It is a database of Bangladeshi journals covering full range of subject categories. The main objective is to improve journal visibility. Articles are freely available online in PDF format. As of February 2012, 76 journals are listed in Bangladesh JOL. Of these, 50 journals are published with delays.

Bangladeshi journals are mostly edited by subject specialists, not by qualified science editors. This is mainly because editing is still not viewed as a profession. Editors rarely get promotion in research organisations. In most local journals professional editing is non-existent. Journals suffer from the lack of good quality papers. There is no local association of science editors, resulting in the lack of educational resources and guidelines for editing. Local journal editors are usually senior physicians and researchers, university professors and administrators, mainly concerned with their primary job responsibilities. Journal editing occupies a tiny space in their working schedule.

Remarkably, a head of Bangladeshi research organisation recently claimed that "editors are like parasitic plants surviving on other trees" (personal communication). As long as people with such mentality hold key administrative positions, it is unlikely we will see the formation and growth of science editing as a viable profession in Bangladesh.

I have been in science editing for more than three decades, though initially I did not plan to become an editor. After studying management and law, instead of the family business, I joined the publication section of an international research centre in Dhaka (ICDDR,B). A few years later, in 1986, I attended an extensive 14-week course on editing and publishing at IRRI, the Philippines, conducted by Ian Montagnes, the former editor in chief of the University of Toronto Press. It became a turning point in my career, which led to more editorial responsibilities. After spending 15 years in editing and scholarly publishing services, I got an opportunity to independently practice and sharpen editing skills in BRAC, the largest non-governmental development organisation in Bangladesh. I was entrusted to edit multi-disciplinary research outcomes of my colleagues from the Research and Evaluation Division. I was also fortunate to attend numerous international meetings and conferences science editors and to exchange ideas with them.

For the first time, I launched training courses for editors and publishing experts under the banner of the Editing and Publication Association of Bangladesh. The initiative unfortunately faced serious internal conflicts and lack of funding. Senior editors did not accept the idea of being trained by more specialised editors and publishing experts.

Feeling more confident in scholarly publishing,
I also founded the bi-annual Bangladesh Journal of Communication and Publishing (2002). It was supported by the Editing and Publication Association of Bangladesh. The journal, however, managed to publish just three issues and was suspended due to internal conflicts of the Association, unacceptable quality of submissions and financial constraints, all of which are common in the developing world.3

Some private and institutional Bangladeshi organisations publish the results of local research in “peer-reviewed” books, mostly in English language. Unfortunately, these books also fall short of the accepted quality of editing.

How to overcome these problems? The logic answer is to nurture science editing and scholarly publishing as a profession. Relevant institutional policies need revision. We have to establish supportive environment to help this profession flourish. How many trained editors and publishing experts should be available for the country? The numbers depend on numbers of research organisations and publishing houses and are subject to volume of research work.

Do we need degree and master courses? Undoubtedly, short diploma courses or one-year master programme would improve the state of science editing. An editing career path should be defined to attract qualified individuals. They should be treated as the mainstream but not support staff. Overseas trainings should be also considered a part of specialisation. Finally, job satisfaction and career prospects need thorough and regular evaluation.

To maintain a steady flow of scientific papers, researchers have to go through regular training in scientific writing. Journal editors should implement more effective and rapid peer review. Above all, sufficient institutional budgets are required to ensure continuity and quality of journal publishing. Online versions of the journals have to be upgraded to meet the ever demanding criteria of prestigious indexing services. Both traditional and alternative impact factors need to be accepted as yardsticks of editorial work.

References