New approaches to publishing scientific reports at NSR

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Beginning this year, NSR will expand its scope by initiating new approaches in publishing research articles. NSR will commit to promoting scientific communication and debate, free of many existing constraints of other major journals (see Perspectives, page 518, this issue). These new initiatives include a new format for soliciting, reviewing and publishing research articles, publishing reviewers’ commentaries, and creating a new section for publishing scientific critiques and debates.

PUBLISHING ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLES

In publishing original research articles, we envisage a format that involves four sets of participating scientists—authors, recommenders, editors and reviewers; all of them could find the participation a rewarding experience.

Recommender—In science publishing, the initial stage of evaluation is most challenging because this demands broad expertise and informed judgment of the handling editor(s). In academic appointments, candidates are required to arrange for recommendation letters from distinguished scientists of the same field. In the same spirit, NSR will require authors to arrange for at least one such recommendation for the initial editorial evaluation. Recommenders are not involved in the subsequent manuscript review process but, if the manuscript is eventually accepted, their name will be identified in the publication. Recommenders would benefit from the opportunity of promoting high-quality research based on his/her scientific judgment. NSR will also gradually assemble a large advisory board consisting of eminent scientists who can actively solicit high-quality submissions.

Editors—Upon receiving the recommended manuscript, the Section Editor, together with a small Editorial Group, will deliberate on whether to proceed with the review. If reviewing does proceed, the Section Editor and Editorial Group will adjudicate between the reviewers (anonymous at this stage) and the authors. To be accepted for publication, the paper must pass rigorous evaluation of the methodology, but does not require complete consensus of all reviewers on the interpretation and significance of the findings, nor excessive efforts in revising manuscript to satisfy all reviewers’ demands. Final decision will require the approval of the Associate Editor-in-Chief of each section.

Reviewers and commentaries—For each accepted publication, reviewers will be asked to write a named commentary on the paper that could be based on the referees’ report and exposition on subjects related to the paper, in the form of a ‘micro-publication’ following the research paper. If the reviewer recommends rejection (likely to be a minority opinion overruled by the Editor), the commentary could be a critique that disagrees with other reviewers. The commentaries will be reviewed internally by the Section Editor and Editorial Group.

In the current model of science publishing, reviewers are passive participants expecting neither recognition nor responsibility for their involvement. Since insightful reviews and constructive suggestions are integral parts that shape the published paper, commentaries bearing reviewers’ names should be considered as scientific contributions on their own and deserve to be recognized. Strict confidentiality is meant to protect the reviewers when the submission is declined publication. We suspect that the standard practice of unconditional confidentiality is the cause of various different problems afflicting almost all journals.

PUBLISHING CRITIQUES AND DEBATES

In the changing climate of favoring consensus over spirited exchanges, NSR will initiate a section for publishing papers that challenge recent findings or existing scientific paradigms. Science advances by modifying and sometimes overturning existing paradigms, but channels for critiques and debates have dwindled in current ‘high-profile’ journals, as evidenced by greatly reduced frequency and increasing difficulty in publishing ‘correspondences/letters’ that criticize the publications in these journals. Papers in Critique and Debate could be directed towards the conception, execution, analysis or interpretation of the original papers in NSR or other scientific journals, and accompanied by commentaries of the reviewers and, within a reasonably short time frame, rebuttal by authors of original publications that are being challenged.

As a new journal on the science publishing landscape, NSR hopes to make distinct multifaceted contributions to the scientific community, including progress reports on various scientific frontiers, forums for discussion on important scientific issues, interviews of key scientists and surveys of scientific institutions, with more focus on those within China. However, at the heart of NSR will be high-quality reviews and innovative original research articles that have no national boundary. We believe these new publication formats will make NSR a preferred platform for publishing research findings, novel ideas and scientific critiques by the international community.

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