

As science becomes more international, scientific editorial boards lag behind

In an era of global science, the diversity of editors controlling the flow of scientific information remains virtually unchanged over the last three decades.



Across the world, countries are investing in science and technology, leading to the emergence of scientific hotspots outside of the traditional centers in the U.S. and Europe. However, a study publishing December 12 in the open access journal *PLOS Biology* by Johanna Espin, Emilio Bruna, and colleagues at the

University of Florida finds that while scientists from an increasing number of countries are represented in the scientific journals in which scientists report their results, the editors of these journals are a far less diverse group. Editors ultimately decide which research papers get published in a journal, and also in deciding who the next crop of editors will be. They therefore play a major role in shaping the direction of their research field.

To assess the diversity of various editorial boards the researchers dug through 30 years of back issues from 24 of the leading journals in their field and identified all members of the editorial board – over 3800 scientists – and the country in which they were based. They found that while scientists from all over the world were publishing in these journals, over 70 percent of the editors were from the United States and the United Kingdom, with most of the remainder from other wealthy European countries. Despite their large and productive scientific communities, Mexico, Brazil, China, and other emerging scientific powerhouses in the Global South were barely represented.

Bruna, an ecologist, is also the editor-in-chief of a scientific journal that publishes research on tropical ecosystems, so he knows firsthand the importance of having a geographically diverse editorial board. “Editors living in a particular place know the local ecosystems better than anyone else, so they often point out mistakes I wouldn’t otherwise catch or highlight studies that will have a high local impact. It’s not something most of us give much thought to, but in a given field a relatively small group of people act as the gatekeepers of knowledge. That’s why I was surprised to learn we don’t know much about where around the world these gatekeepers are based.”

Johanna Espin, the lead author on the paper, says, “It is dispiriting to examine three decades of more than 20 journals, and realize that, while the development of science and the total of scientists from the Global South has increased, their representation in editorial boards remains almost unchanged. Given the impact it can have on the diffusion of knowledge, we argue that it is the ethical duty of journals to increase their geographic diversity.”

“People think that the scientific community is agnostic, but as with any established institution, be it the boardroom, Wall Street, or Hollywood, it’s a club,” says Bruna, “and it’s up to us to change the rules of getting into that club.”

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Image Caption: While scientists from an increasing number of countries are represented in scientific publications, the editors of scientific journals are a far less diverse group.

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