

Henry Oldenburg: The first journal editor

Henry Oldenburg (c. 1619– 5 September 1677) was a German philosopher, considered as one of the foremost scientific intelligencers of Europe of early modern period. He began his career as a tutor and travelled Europe widely, meeting many learned men extending his prodigious network of contacts. With an extraordinarily broad range of interests, Oldenburg had mastered several languages-English, Dutch, French, German, Italian and Latin.^[1] Thus, in 1660, when the Royal Society was formed in London to promote “natural philosophy” (the philosophical study of nature and the physical universe as the precursor of modern science), Oldenburg was a natural choice for the post of secretary of the society. Considering his vast acquaintance among the intellectuals of Europe and his skills and ability as a linguist, society’s correspondence was entrusted to him. The members of the society were mainly university professors, medical doctors, and enthusiastic people. The members of the society started meeting frequently to discuss among themselves, and those who could not attend meeting used to send letters to the society. One of the job of Oldenburg was to read out these communication and often replying to them.^[2] Oldenburg devoted himself with extraordinary dedication and energy to the society’s work and act as an important intermediary by sending the comments of society members to correspondents. Although the Royal Society used to pay him for his secretarial work, that was insufficient, and he had to scratch out a living with a precarious financial situation. In 1665, Oldenburg came up with a proposal to the Royal Society where he decided to bring out a printed version of the scientific communications of the society. Although this new venture was to promote the scientific activity of the Royal Society, saving him from the labor of copying the same news to all the members of the society in half a dozen languages, his primary intention was purely financial– he thought that this venture would earn him a decent living. Thus, the *Philosophical Transactions* was born. The first issue of the journal was published on 6 March, 1665 – it was 16 pages long and had ten short articles such as whale watching in the Bermudas, making of optical glass, and the performance of a pendulum watch at sea.^[3] With his prodigious network of contacts, Oldenburg could secure contributions from Britain and Europe’s leading natural philosophers, and many landmark articles got published in this journal in the first few years. But, Oldenburg never succeeded in gaining his living from the journal.^[4] Under his editorship, Oldenburg had put forth 136 issues of the journal by the time of his death in 1677. The publication of *Philosophical Transactions* was interrupted by the plague of 1665, the great fire of 1666, and during the war of 1667. During the second Anglo–Dutch war of 1667, due to his continuous scientific correspondence with Dutch intellectuals, Oldenburg was briefly imprisoned on the suspicion of passing information to the enemy.

However, one must understand that the “peer-review” in the sense of peers judging the publishability of a manuscript did not become a standard practice for the journals until after World War II. The classical example is the British medical



Henry Oldenburg (Photo Courtesy: The Royal Society)

journal “The Lancet.” The journal was born in 1823, but did not adopt peer-review until 1976.^[5] In the seventeenth-century or early eighteenth century, decisions to accept or reject would commonly be made by the editor himself or a small group of peers appointed by the editor. In 1672, when Isaac Newton submitted his manuscript on “New theory about light and colors” to *Philosophical Transactions*, Oldenburg sent it to three fellows of the society, which also included Robert Hooke. The critical analysis of Newton’s work by Hooke, which Oldenburg sent to Newton, made him very angry.^[6] Also, numerous responses challenging Newton’s work made him very unhappy about the process.^[7] Newton never published any of his work in journals again; instead, he chose the book as the preferred method for publishing his scientific work. He published two books “*Principia*” in the year 1687 and “*Optics*” in 1704 instead of publishing again in the journals. Many people blame Oldenburg for the rivalry between Newton and Hooke, but evidences suggest that it is not true^[8]; Oldenburg perhaps tried to implement a gatekeeping mechanism for the scientific literature for which he had to pay the price of such dubious allegation. The *Philosophical Transactions* is still being published regularly and is the world’s first and longest-running scientific journal.

Today about 30,000 peer-reviewed journals are publishing more than 2 million articles a year.^[9] But let us not forget the man who opened a new horizon for the scientific world and pioneered the process of peer-review.

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