
EDITORIAL

Middle East Association of Science Editors The History and the Challenge

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Writing and editing are inseparable professions, both of which started when man first decided to document his civilisation by putting engravings and landmarks on walls, stones, animal skins, tapestries, papyrus, paper and lastly, computers. The modification of these forms of publication required constant editing, aimed at either a better representation of the message to be preserved, or at showing a new and different expression of the language, for example in astronomy, science, theology, literature or mythology. It follows from this context that there are also two inseparable groups of professions: the writers and editors on one hand, and the astronomers, scientists, theologians on the other.

In recent practice, any of the above professions could be further subgrouped into subspecialities, still meaning that an ultraspeciality is a profession. As a result of the proliferation of professions, there is a diversity of interests and a realisation that minorities must get together to feel their existence and strength by talking to each other in their common language or interest. These groups also gradually realised the importance of forming their own clubs, societies and associations, which later turned into federations, conglomerates and unions. The prime idea behind the formation of these groups is protecting the interest of the members which in extreme cases can result in confrontation with law and order.

In the Middle East, there are a large number of journals covering the various fields of science, producing at least 250,000 works every year. However, the flow and quality of these journals can suffer because of their inability to develop when faced with local challenges, rather than because of their editors, who are often frustrated when their efforts are neither remunerated nor recognised by service and academic institutions. The problem is due to a lack of confidence in the local journals, even in those periodicals with international figures on their editorial boards. It is therefore not so much a problem of the editors, but of the journals. A local journal can depend for its survival on the support from the mother organisation but the editor still has to work independently of all influences. From these contexts there is a need for editors to get together not only to establish a common language of understanding and to share experiences among themselves, but also to strengthen their journals. Putting resources together improves the quality of the journals and helps in the establishment of new specialised ones.

The situation and problems of editors are nearly always similar in all countries, including the Middle East, which in many parts shares common history and language. It is therefore important that editors of this region form their own association.

Back in the early 1980s, the editors of the Bahrain Medical Bulletin wanted to broaden their horizons and establish cooperation between local journals in the Arabian Gulf region. An "Association" for medical

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journals was thought possible. As a result of this a small group of editors from four medical journals in the region met several times to discuss the issue. It was soon realised that the matter was not as simple as originally thought. At first local politics and geographic aspects were considered and definitions and boundaries established, then finances and responsibility leading to organisational problems were discussed, and finally the decision of whether the aim was to form an "Association" for journals or for editors.

On the other hand, medicine is a very small specialty of science and it cannot be separated from other allied specialties. The main theme at this stage of development was to establish an association for editors, not journals, and to enlarge the scope to include all specialties of science rather than one of its branches. The proceedings and side discussions of these meetings, as well as the ideas to solve major obstacles, were to hibernate for more than eight years, arising occasionally to remind the editors of the need to get together, especially when attending the scientific and editorial activities of other organisations.

In November 1989, the Bahrain Medical Bulletin and the Journal of Bahrain Medical Society organised a seminar on "Local Journals in the International Network" at the Arabian Gulf University in Bahrain. Participants from eight countries in the Middle East and five other countries, as well as representatives from the African Association of Science Editors, Ciba Foundation, International Federation of Science Editors and the World Health Organisation, attended the three-day meeting. During the seminar, the Bahraini group of editors revived the issue of "Association". They suggested the formation of a regional organisation of science editors to be called The Middle East Association of Science Editors (MEASE) and circulated a proposed Statutes for Discussion. The participants accepted the suggestion, and agreed to define the Middle East as the region extending from Afghanistan and Iran in the east, to Egypt and Sudan in the west, Turkey in the north and the Arabian Peninsular in the south. The participants were considered the Assembly of Founders of MEASE. They amended a number of issues in the proposed Statutes presented by the Bahraini group of editors and approved its final form. The Statutes outlined the purpose of MEASE and its bylaws, administration, membership and finances.

The primary objective of MEASE is the promotion of cooperation among editors in various fields of scientific editing such as refereeing, exchange of expertise and information between editors and journals, unification of writing style, training of editors and writers and the arrangement of periodic scientific meetings. MEASE shall promote the dissemination of scientific information, encourage the publication of local scientific works into regional rather than international journals, and publish press releases, bulletins and a regional directory of editors and journals. It will also provide financial support for various activities concerned with scientific writing, and help in the publication of specialised scientific journals and indexing databases in the Middle East.

The Assembly of Founders elected the first Executive Board of MEASE for a two-year term. The board is made up of a president, two vice-presidents, a secretary, a treasurer and seven members, with an immediate past president to be elected at subsequent terms.