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DISCUSSION DOCUMENT:
**BEST PRACTICES FOR
GUEST EDITED COLLECTIONS**

DISCUSSION

BEST PRACTICES FOR GUEST EDITED COLLECTIONS

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We welcome further comments; please send your feedback to **Natalie Ridgeway, Executive Officer** cope_execofficer@publicationethics.org

Introduction

Guest edited article collections (also called special issues, research topics, hot topics, themed collections, compilations, conference proceedings issues) are becoming more prevalent in the publishing industry, and concerns have been raised about the quality of the content in these collections. The collections are often overseen and edited by guest editors who are solicited or who propose (unsolicited) to edit a collection of articles on a topical subject area. These guest editors typically invite or commission submissions to the collection and oversee the peer review process. Guest edited collections can be more susceptible to organised fraud (eg, peer review manipulation), financial conflicts of interest, greater instances of endogeneity (papers published by guest editors and their close colleagues), citation cartels, and paper mills, and can lack ethical oversight.

The publication of collections with a themed topic can be an established and legitimate way of communicating focused or unique information that is within the scope of the parent journal. These collections can allow targeted production of related information and promote innovation in research. With the proliferation of guest edited article collections, defining best practices for ethical implementation for publishers and journals who wish to introduce or already have such collections is increasingly important. Several press releases and Retraction Watch articles reported that all major publishers have undertaken large scale investigations with the subsequent retraction of tens to hundreds of papers or conference proceedings from guest edited collections.¹⁻⁶ Reasons for retraction on this scale included manipulation of the peer review process, including falsification of reviews and fake identities, lack of oversight of ethical matters, and inappropriate levels of endogeneity.

The output from guest edited collections should be managed by publishers and journals in a way that validly supports the growth and reach of the journal and continues to encourage collaboration in established and emerging subject areas, while ensuring good and ethical publishing practices. Experience has shown that guest edited collections can expose journals to greater risks; these risks should be carefully considered by journals and publishers before starting these projects, as well as during regular audits.

These guidelines and recommendations are a first attempt to look at these concerns and share recommended best practices to create and manage guest edited article collections.

Checklist for creating guest edited collections

1

Journals and publishers should consider the following advice before starting guest edited article collections.

- Ensure staff involved in the publishing and hosting processes are aware of the particularities of the collections in terms of verification of quality, timing of publication (eg, potential embargos to publish all articles together), presentation on the website, and depositing.
- The editor-in-chief and editorial teams should consider the topic(s) to be covered in the collection(s) and ensure they are aligned with the scope of the journal.
- The editor-in-chief should understand and agree to their role and responsibilities for the organisation and oversight of these collections, including whether operational teams, assistants, or other editors are needed.
- Have a system in place, with trained staff, to validate the credentials of guest editors and the proposals for guest edited article collections.
- Ensure guest editors have clear guidelines for the commissioning and editing processes of the content of the collection, and that the guest editors have reviewed these guidelines and have agreed to act in accordance with the journal's policies.⁷
- Guest editors should have clear terms and conditions of their role and have a full understanding of the ethos of the journal, as well as the peer review and publishing model.
- For journals with article processing charges, ensure that guest editors are aware of publishing costs and agree to be transparent about costs with potential contributors.

Editing article collections

2

Journals and publishers should consider these steps to ensure that article collections are edited according to valid publishing practices and ethical standards when they are collecting content.



Ensure guest editors are provided with clear guidelines on the editing process at the journal for the content in the collection.



Include in the guidelines, and take steps to ensure, that contributions from guest editors and their close colleagues (with close professional or personal relationships⁸) are limited to a small part of the content of the guest edited collections, to avoid real or perceived competing interests, as well as endogeneity and publishing cartels.



Although the guest editor of the collection will primarily select the content for the collection, the editor-in-chief of the journal has ultimate responsibility for queries on scope, competing interests, and peer review issues. If the editor-in-chief has competing interests with the collection, or does not have the capacity to handle more guest edited issues, another relevant editor of the board, or member of the editorial office, should be assigned as the contact and coordinator for these queries.



Editorial decisions for manuscripts where guest editors are authors should be made independently of the guest editors.



Publishing a large number of guest edited article collections can raise concerns about the independence, impartiality, and credibility of the journal. Oversight is needed by the editor-in-chief, senior editorial board members, or a team of support staff. The number of guest edited collections should not exceed an amount that can reasonably be overseen by the editor-in-chief, editorial board, and editorial office staff.



Regular audits of the peer review process of guest edited collections by the journal are recommended, verifying the number and expertise of the reviewers, and reviewing turnaround times and the content of the review reports.



If editorial office staff or editors identify irregularities in research or publication ethics, or if suspicions of ethical violations are raised by authors, reviewers, editors, or third parties, the journal should investigate these concerns. Journals should suspend the peer review and publication process of all content in the collection while the investigation is ongoing. This process is particularly relevant for cases of suspected compromised peer review.

Ethical responsibilities

During the course of guest edited collections, from article collection to post-publication, journals, publishers, editors, guest editors, and authors have ethical responsibilities. Standard ethics and principles of journals apply; ethical responsibilities should be clearly and explicitly included in internal editorial guidelines, in guidelines for guest editors of collections, and in public author guidelines.

3.1. Before submission



Scope: The editor-in-chief, guest editor, and journal editorial team share responsibility for ensuring that the collection and its content fall within the scope of the journal.



Competing interests: statements should be provided by the guest editors of the collection for any conflicts of interests (real, potential, or perceived) related to the topic of the research (eg, existing patents or ongoing patent applications, institution or company non-disclosure agreements, sponsorship of publishing fees for the collection by the hiring institution, or ongoing collaborations or other connections with invited authors) as well as any other relevant conflicts of interests.⁸



Financial conflicts: if guest edited collections are funded by external sources, the guidelines of the **International Committee of Medical Journal Editors** (<https://b.link/icmje-8>) should be followed, and the editor is responsible for content and peer review of the submissions, independently of the external funder's interests⁹ (although this guidance is produced by the ICMJE, the principles apply to all research disciplines). Also, solicitation of submissions based on waiver of the article processing charge should be carefully monitored by the journal. Incentives should be in line with the waiver policies of the journal and details should be included in the guidelines for guest editors.



Promotion: journals should pay particular attention to whether a collection is being used as a tool for self-promotion, or for promotion of a particular product or company, or as an outlet for a consortium of researchers who have editorial control over the collection.



Commissioning content: if guest editors have personal or professional relationships with authors they commission content from, this could lead to bias in the selection of articles. Guidelines for guest editors should highlight the need for broader commissioning of content, covering other viewpoints and research in the field. Journals should consider encouraging open calls for participation in guest issues. However, indiscriminate and overly broad solicitations should be avoided.



Identity concerns: the identity of the researchers editing the collection should be validated before the start of the project by the editor-in-chief and journal editorial team. The credentials of the guest editors should be verified, and validation of email addresses and institutions is recommended. The same principles apply if a guest editor joins the editorial team after the start of the project. Guest editors who are responsible for editorial decisions should have experience in editing or at least in reviewing scholarly articles.



Workload: the journal editorial team has a responsibility to clearly explain the amount of work required by guest editors (eg, specificities of the peer review model, recruitment of editors, decisions on articles, lifespan of the collection). The guest editor should consider their workload and potential conflicts of interest if they are also on other editorial boards or are editors of other journals.¹⁰

3.2. During peer review

Collections have a higher risk of being targeted for some types of fraudulent activity and are likely to require broader investigations when ethical issues are detected or suspected. Although guest edited collections can be subject to the more usual types of fraud (eg, plagiarism, salami slicing, data fabrication, authorship manipulation), the following is a list of questionable activities more commonly seen in guest edited collections that can affect several manuscripts or articles.



Competing interests: as with standard peer review procedures, any conflicts of interests (real, potential, apparent, or perceived) with authors must be disclosed by editors and reviewers as soon as possible.⁸ In some research disciplines, often some of the authors of the content of the collection will act as reviewers for the contributions of other authors. This practice should not remove the requirement for a standard competing interests declaration between participants in the peer review process for the collection, and the subsequent assessment of these competing interests.



Self-citation: collections can be used to promote a guest editor's own research, and the use of extensive self-citations or repeated requests to authors to include references to the editor's publications should be monitored. This behaviour is unethical and can also be noted by indexing agencies, which could result in the exclusion of the journal's content from databases. Exceptions for narrow areas of research and some review articles can be made.

Citation cartels: these cartels involve a group of researchers agreeing to cite each other's papers. This practice is more common in collection projects and should be monitored and prevented.



Peer review fraud: the two most common types of peer review fraud to consider are reviewers with fake email addresses suggested by authors, allowing the authors or their coauthors or colleagues to review their own manuscripts, and networks of peer researchers (so-called “rings”) where researchers review and accept each other’s contributions, often using template review reports.



Identity theft: the fraudulent use of a researcher’s identity can affect all participants in the peer review process (ie, authors, reviewers, and editors). The credentials of the guest editor should be validated before the start of the collection. The identities of reviewers (credentials, affiliations, email addresses) should be checked. Journals should also check that all of the listed authors are aware and agree to the manuscript’s submission to the collection.



Paper mill manuscripts: guest edited collections are often targeted by paper mill companies that manufacture manuscripts and submit them to a journal for a fee on behalf of researchers, with the purpose of providing an easy route to publication or to offer authorship for sale. These companies often submit to guest edited collections because of a complicit guest editor or because they believe that guest editors will be less likely to detect fraudulent behaviour.^{11 12}

3.3. Post-publication



The journal and editor-in-chief are responsible for dealing with post-publication concerns raised about the content published in collections in their journal. In many cases, collections are edited by guest editors who are not permanent editorial board members and are not affiliated with the journal after the collection is completed. The editor-in-chief should be aware of and take responsibility for the content in a collection, as for any other content in the journal, and work with their journal editorial team to evaluate concerns raised by readers.



Post-publication concerns raised about the content of a collection should be handled as promptly and rigorously as concerns raised about other standalone published content or regular issues of the journal. Specific guidelines should be developed by the journal to escalate issues directly to the editor-in-chief or to a nominated editorial board member. Editorial decisions about content post-publication, especially relating to potential retractions, should be taken by the editor-in-chief, and not the guest editor, although consultation with the guest editor may be appropriate in some instances.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS



INCREASED RISKS

Journals and publishers should be aware that collections can expose journals to greater risks in terms of unethical behaviours and peer review manipulation that should be carefully considered before the start of these projects.



GUIDANCE

Guest editors should be provided with clear terms and guidance on their role in organising, commissioning, and editing content for collections in the journal. Standard ethics, principles, and policies of the journal apply.



INVESTIGATIONS

Journals should suspend the peer review and publication process of all content in a collection when investigations into unethical practices involving guest editors are ongoing.



BEHAVIOURS

Some types of broad and complex unethical behaviours (eg, citation cartels, undisclosed competing interests, peer review fraud, identity theft) are more common in collections and should be carefully monitored by journals for early detection and prevention.



CONTENT

The editor-in-chief is responsible for the content published in their journal, including guest edited collections, and post-publication concerns should be escalated to them. If the editor-in-chief cannot maintain oversight of the content, the journal should assign other editors or editorial coordinators for support. Alternatively, the number of guest edited issues should be reduced and limited to a manageable level for the existing editorial team.

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FURTHER READING

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualisation:

The original outline for this document was discussed during the COPE annual retreat in October 2022. The resulting discussion document was elaborated and written by Marie Soulière.

We describe contributions to this project as follows:

Writing – original draft preparation: Marie Soulière	Writing – review and editing: Marie Soulière, Nancy Chescheir, Jennifer Wright, Howard Browman
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Development of COPE resources

COPE resources are initiated with a scope which is reviewed by the Education subcommittee for its suitability, priority and remit, and then by COPE Council. A fuller scope and Conflict of Interest statements from all authors are then considered by the Education subcommittee and the Trustee Board, taking into account the remit of COPE. The author/s produce a full draft which is reviewed by Council and the Trustee Board, and comments are incorporated. The final version is then approved by both Council and the Trustee Board.

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