

*Viewpoint*

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# Should editors-in-chief publish in their own journals? ‘Publish elsewhere’ is not a solution

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## Abstract

The question of should editors-in-chief (EICs) publish in their own journals has been hotly debated in academic spheres. Some authors have recommended that EICs should refrain from publishing articles in their own journals. They advocate for a 'publish elsewhere' solution. For EICs and journals, a 'publish elsewhere' solution is unjust, unfair, inadequate, and counterproductive. For manuscripts (co) authored by EICs, an alternative solution is to use an open peer review procedure in which reviewers' comments are made public alongside EICs/authors' responses. An open peer review procedure should make the submission and acceptance dates, the number of revision rounds that EICs' articles went through, and the identities of handling editors available to readers and the general public.

## Keywords:

Editors-in-chief, ethics, open peer review, self-publishing

**Introduction**

Editors-in-chief (EICs) of journals are the main gatekeepers in scholarly publishing.<sup>1</sup> They must ensure, among other things, that their journals are of the highest possible publishing and scientific standard.<sup>2,3</sup> Some EICs are also active researchers. They not only evaluate other people's academic work but also create their own. A potential conflict of interest arises when an author of a journal article is also an EIC of the publishing journal. The question then becomes, Should EICs publish articles in their own journals?

This question has been hotly debated in academic spheres.<sup>4-7</sup> Several articles have been published in recent years investigating the extent of such self-publishing practice in various disciplines, including medicine,<sup>8</sup> communication,<sup>9</sup> and public administration.<sup>10</sup> The recent article by Helgesson et al.<sup>1</sup> offers a systematic review of the extant literature on this topic. Helgesson et al.<sup>1</sup> concluded their article by stating that 'given the evidence of previous misuse, and suspicion thereof, we recommend that at least editors-in-chief avoid publishing research papers in their own journals' (p. 238). To put it another

way, Helgesson et al.<sup>1</sup> advocate for a 'publish elsewhere' solution.

**Is 'publish elsewhere' an ethical solution?**

Some publishers, as well as professional and publication ethics bodies, have issued guidelines for the publication of EICs in their own journals. For instance, Taylor & Francis publishing group (publisher of over 2700 journals) states, on its editor resources webpage,<sup>11</sup> that EICs can publish articles in their own journals, but they must follow a recusal policy, which states that they should not be involved in the peer review and editorial decision-making processes for their own articles. According to the guidelines by Taylor & Francis, this recusal policy should also be made clear to readers (e.g., via a footnote in the article and on the journal homepage), so that others can see that a fair process was followed.

Guidelines for self-publishing EICs have been provided by the Council of Science Editors (CSE), the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE), and the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE). They are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1. Guidelines for editors-in-chief publishing in their own journals by CSE, ICMJE, and COPE**

Professional/ publication ethics entity	Guidelines
Council of Science Editors (CSE) <sup>a</sup>	'Also, editors should submit their own manuscripts to the journal only if full masking of the process can be ensured (e.g., anonymity of the peer reviewers and lack of access to records of their own manuscript). Journals should have a procedure in place to guide the handling of submissions by editors, associate editors, editorial board members and colleagues/students of any of these to allow for peer review and decision making that avoids any conflict of interest. Editorials and/or opinion pieces are an exception to this rule'.
International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) <sup>b</sup>	'Editors who make final decisions about manuscripts should recuse themselves from editorial decisions if they have relationships or activities that pose potential conflicts related to articles under consideration. [...] Journals should take extra precautions and have a stated policy for evaluation of manuscripts submitted by individuals involved in editorial decisions'.
Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) <sup>c</sup>	'While you should not be denied the ability to publish in your own journal, you must take extra precautions not to exploit your position or to create an impression of impropriety. Your journal must have a procedure for handling submissions from editors or members of the editorial board that will ensure that the peer review is handled independently of the author/editor. We also recommend that you describe the process in a commentary or similar note once the paper is published'.

These guidelines are available in the links below. They were last accessed on 3 October 2022.

<sup>a</sup><https://www.councilscienceeditors.org/resource-library/editorial-policies/publication-ethics/2-1-editor-roles-and-responsibilities/>

<sup>b</sup><http://www.icmje.org/recommendations/browse/roles-and-responsibilities/author-responsibilities--conflicts-of-interest.html>

<sup>c</sup>[https://publicationethics.org/files/A\\_Short\\_Guide\\_to\\_Ethical\\_Editing.pdf](https://publicationethics.org/files/A_Short_Guide_to_Ethical_Editing.pdf)

To sum up, the attitude reflected in these guidelines by the CSE, ICMJE, and COPE is that EICs may publish in their own journals, but there must be a procedure in place to ensure that they are not given undue advantages in the peer review process. The 'publish elsewhere' solution is in collision with all of these publication ethics guidelines. It could even be argued that it is unethical.

The 'publish elsewhere' solution also violates the right of EICs to publish in any journal, including the one that they oversee. It breaches EICs' academic freedom. The 'publish elsewhere' solution implies that all EICs are bad-intentioned and that their ultimate goal in becoming EICs is to publish their research output in the journals over which they have power. There are no laws or guidelines prohibiting EICs from publishing in their journals. With that said, EICs should not recommend reviewers, participate in decision-making, or even discuss the decision with handling editors. Furthermore, this lack of involvement in the acceptance of the manuscript should be made clear to the readers as well as the general public (e.g., via a note in the journal's article indicating how the peer review process was handled).

#### Is 'publish elsewhere' a viable option?

For EICs and journals, a 'publish elsewhere' solution is inadequate and counterproductive. There are in any field four to five journals that are the right publication venues for the targeted audience. A 'publish elsewhere' solution means eliminating one journal, reducing the number of possible publication venues for their EICs by 20%–25%. For many fields, this is quite substantial. Even though these four to five journals serve the same field and may have close/overlapping aims and scopes, they usually have editorial policies and research priorities that are not identical. Each of them has its positioning within that

field. The 'publish elsewhere' solution forces scholarship into the potentially itchy fitting of publications to prevent the impression of impropriety.

Adopting the 'publish elsewhere' solution also entails depriving an academic association (and its affiliates) of easy access to one of its renowned members' work. Yes, the EIC might publish elsewhere. However, there is no guarantee that readers and subscribers will read elsewhere. It would be damaging to readers and the field if they missed (specialized) content that should have been published in a (specialized) journal, and if EICs were not allowed to publish in the journals that they are serving.<sup>4</sup> It would be a shame for a journal to give up the chance to publish an article authored by the EIC who does research and may have been picked as an EIC due to his/her competence in the field and whose manuscript is ideally suited to the readership.<sup>5</sup>

Before becoming the EIC of a journal, one usually serves on that journal's editorial/review board. An EIC is likely to be an authority in the field and a regular author in the journal. Prospective EICs would be discouraged if they were unable to publish in the journal for which they were appointed, potentially leading to less-experienced/qualified individuals taking up the post.<sup>5</sup>

EICs participate in research with colleagues and students, with whom they coauthor manuscripts on their findings. The 'publish elsewhere' solution unfairly limits the avenues of publication available to EICs' colleagues/students. It will eventually isolate EICs from their research communities or, worse, will lead to unethical publication practices like ghost authorship (i.e., EICs declining authorship of research in which they have made a substantial contribution).<sup>6</sup>

### An open peer review procedure as the solution

One recommended solution is to use an open peer review procedure, such as the one used by F1000Research (<https://f1000research.com/>) for manuscripts (co)authored by EICs. The process of open peer review entails making reviewers' comments public alongside the EIC/author's responses.<sup>2,12</sup> By publishing an article along with the relevant peer-reviewing discussion, the journal may protect its reputation as well as that of the EIC and any co-authors. By making the peer-reviewing dialogue public, readers can decide for themselves whether or not reviewers were 'friendly'/biased. By doing so, bias and the appearance of bias will be reduced. Since scholarly publishing is a technology-driven enterprise, it is simple to incorporate reviewers' comments and EIC's responses into an article or to publish them as a supplemental material. For example, Royal Society Open Science (a journal of The Royal Society) publishes peer-reviewing dialogues as supplemental materials (<https://royalsocietypublishing.org/journal/rsos>).<sup>13</sup> Readers should also be notified of the submission and acceptance dates for the articles of the EICs. The number of revision rounds that each of these articles underwent should likewise be made public. Readers can use all of this information to determine whether EICs' articles were handled more quickly or not. In the final version of the articles, the name(s) of the handling editor(s) of the articles (co)written by EICs must be mentioned.

It should be noted that open peer review is one of the four core principles of open science, along with open access, open source, and open data.<sup>14</sup> The 'publish elsewhere' solution would be rendered pointless if scholarly journals implemented open

peer review for all submitted manuscripts, regardless of who authored them (i.e., EICs, editorial/review board members, or common authors).

### Conclusion

EICs are critical players in the scholarly publishing ecosystem. In their journals, they wield considerable power. They are also (presumably) the brightest minds in their field, as well as those who possess the most knowledge. As Michel Foucault,<sup>15</sup> the French sociologist and critic, famously wrote: 'The exercise of power creates knowledge and, conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power' (p. 52).

Manuscripts (co)authored by EICs and submitted to the journals they oversee should be treated with the utmost transparency and honesty in order to protect the reputations of the EICs and their journals.

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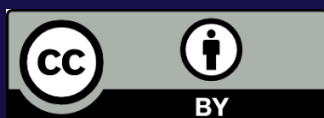
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