





# Editors publishing in their own journals: A systematic review of prevalence and a discussion of normative aspects

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## Abstract

Journal editors are the main gatekeepers in scientific publishing. Yet there is a concern that they may receive preferential treatment when submitting manuscripts to their own journals. The prevalence of such self-publishing is not known, nor the consequences for reliability and trustworthiness of published research. This study aimed to systematically review the literature on the prevalence of editors publishing in their own journals and to conduct a normative ethical analysis of this practice. A systematic review was performed using the following databases: Medline, PsycInfo, Scopus and Web of Science. Articles that provided primary data about editors publishing in their own journals were included. We identified 15 studies meeting inclusion criteria. There was large variability of self-publishing across fields, journals and editors, ranging from those who never published in their own journal to those publishing extensively in their own journal. Many studies suffered from serious methodological limitations. Nevertheless, our results show that there are settings where levels of self-publication are very high. We recommend that editors-in-chief and associate editors who have considerable power in journals refrain from publishing research articles in their own journals. Journals should have clear processes in place about the treatment of articles submitted by editorial board members.

**Keywords:** authorship, bias, conflict of interest, editors, editorial boards, publication ethics

## INTRODUCTION

Publication in scientific journals is a primary mode of research communication as well as a currency of merit for individual scientists. Therefore, mechanisms to determine what gets published have a major impact on the quality and trustworthiness of the scientific literature as a whole and on individual scientists' careers.

Editors of scientific journals are the main gatekeepers in scientific publishing. Typically, a decision to accept a research article

for publication is preceded by peer review, which is intended to ensure that work of low quality is less likely to be published (although the efficacy of peer review for this purpose has been debated (e.g., Smith, 2006). However, conflicts of interest may challenge the impartiality of editorial handling (Radun, 2021). Since most editors are active researchers, they not only evaluate others' academic work, but produce their own (Bedeian et al., 2009; Pardeck & Meinert, 1999; Zdeněk & Lososova, 2018). One potential conflict of interest arises when an author of a research article at the same time

is an editor of the journal. Such a conflict of interest may exist even if the manuscript is handled by another editor of the journal.

Some journals publish original work contributed by their own editors, while others do not (Graf et al., 2007). Some journals and publishers even encourage their editors to publish in their own journal(s) (e.g., *Frontiers*, 2021). There have been remarkable examples of editors with a massive output of research papers in their own journals. In an extreme case from theoretical physics, an editor is claimed to have published nearly 60 papers in his own journal during 1 year (Schiermeier, 2008). In a paper by Hamilton et al. (2020), 322 journal editors in ecology, economics, medicine, physics and psychology were asked about their views on publishing in their own journal. A majority (79%) responded that they found it acceptable under certain conditions (such as independent editing and reviewing) while a minority stated that this would not be acceptable for any editor (13%) or for the lead editor (8%).

Risk of bias, favouritism and conflicts of interest are central themes brought up by critics regarding editors publishing in their own journals (Bošnjak et al., 2011). Favourable treatment may include different facets such as selection of reviewers known to be friendly, a higher likelihood of acceptance, and faster handling. For instance, Scanff et al. (2021) reported that in a set of journals ( $n = 98$ ) with a high proportion of papers from particularly prolific authors, 'the most prolific author was part of the editorial board in 60 cases (61%), among whom 25 (26% of the 98) were editors-in-chief', and that papers by these authors were more likely to be accepted for publication within 3 weeks of their submission. Very short lag times between submission and publication were observed for some papers authored by journal editors, calling into question whether these papers were peer reviewed in any meaningful sense.

Publication by editors in their own journals nevertheless finds its defenders, in several guidelines and journals and in science-related social media (see discussion below). In order to judge the potential severity of problems relating to editors publishing in their own journals, knowledge about the prevalence of this practice is essential.

This study aimed firstly to investigate the prevalence of editors publishing in their own journals by means of a systematic review, and secondly to discuss normative issues relating to editors publishing in their own journals.

In what follows, we first describe the empirical methods used and the results from the literature survey of empirical studies about editors publishing in their own journals. Then we present recommendations of some well-established guidelines on the matter and summarize arguments identified in the literature and in social media. Thereafter, we provide our own analysis of arguments in favour of and against editors publishing in their own journals, as well as regarding what restrictions and regulations that need to be in place for such practice to be defensible.

## METHODS

A systematic search of the peer-reviewed literature was performed on 30 December 2020. The following databases were

### Key points

- There is concern that scientific journal editors submitting papers to their own journals may receive preferential treatment.
- Our systematic review shows that the prevalence of editors publishing in their own journals varies greatly between journals.
- Our results do not show that biased review practices benefiting editors publishing in their own journal are widespread.
- Journal guidelines should include clear information about the handling procedure for submissions authored by editors.
- Overall, it is preferable that at least editors-in-chief strive to avoid publishing research papers in their own journals.

used: Medline, PsycInfo, Scopus and Web of Science. Articles that provided primary data about editors publishing in their own journal were included. The search was performed jointly by one researcher (IR) and an information specialist at the Helsinki University Library (for the full search strategy, see Data S1). Duplicates were removed by two methods: automatic removal of duplicates in EndNote and manual removal. Both methods produced an almost identical result. Two researchers (IR and JR) independently screened titles and abstracts, resulting in 44 relevant articles. After full text screening, the final sample included 15 articles (for the Prisma flow chart, see Data S2). The same two researchers then independently read the selected articles, discussed each study, and extracted information on (a) sampling frame: journals, editors, years and types of publication; and (b) main findings—and agreed upon the final extracted data. Methodological limitations and considerations were noted in a separate column. None of the 15 papers has been retracted according to the publishers' websites (24 October 2021). The full list of search results is available on <https://osf.io/dtcsp/>.

In the normative part of this study, we have included argumentation also from the excluded 29 articles which were nevertheless read in full. However, this extraction was not done in a systematic manner. In addition to this material, argumentation found in social media discussing these practices was also included, originating with a discussion on Researchgate in June 2020 ([www.researchgate.net/post/Editor\\_in\\_Chief\\_publishes\\_10\\_papers\\_per\\_year\\_in\\_own\\_journal](http://www.researchgate.net/post/Editor_in_Chief_publishes_10_papers_per_year_in_own_journal)). These sources have not been searched systematically.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

Out of the 15 studies that were retained (see Table 1), 10 were focused in scope on a particular scientific field or subfield

**TABLE 1** Overview of papers identified in the systematic review

Study	Sample/methods	Main results	Comments/notes
Bošnjak et al., 2011	<p><b>Journals:</b> 180 Croatian journals (167 indexed in Croatian database HRCAK &amp; additional 13 indexed in Web of Science or Scopus)</p> <p><b>Editors:</b> 256 (172 EICs and 84 associate, executive or junior editors) of 167 journals and 13 editors of 13 journals</p> <p><b>Years:</b> 2005–2008</p> <p><b>Publications:</b> All types and ‘publications relevant for official requirement for academic promotion’</p>	<p>256 editors published 887 publications in own journals; 332 publications ‘were relevant for official requirement for academic promotion’.</p> <p>Regarding these relevant publications: 45% of all editors (N = 269) did not publish in their own journal; 6.6% published 5 or more articles in their own journal.</p> <p>Only 2 editors exclusively published in own journals</p> <p>None of the journals had ‘a policy on the manuscript submissions by journal editors’; however, one journal ‘had a statement on the restrictions of published articles from authors, including editorial members’.</p>	<p>The authors concluded that the majority of editors ‘did not misuse their own journals for scientific publishing and academic promotion’.</p> <p>They were, however, concerned about the lack of transparency regarding submissions by editors. It was unclear when the editors were editors during the whole 4-year period.</p> <p>Some inconsistency in reporting (e.g., in abstract it says that there were 256 editors of 180 journals; however, in the text the number is 269)</p>
Goudira et al., 2018	<p><b>Journals:</b> Top 5 (according to IF) journals per fields of anaesthesiology and gastroenterology</p> <p><b>Editors:</b> First 5 editorial board members in each journal in 2015</p> <p><b>Years:</b> Previous 5 years</p> <p><b>Publications:</b> All types</p>	<p>Across journals, editors were more likely to publish in their own journal in comparison to any of the other four journals.</p>	<p>It is unclear to us when the editors took the role. It could be that these people became the editors because they had extensively published in the journal before taking the editorial role.</p> <p>Some journals might expect from their editors to write editorials—unclear why they were included. Apparently, the data collection lasted 6 months.</p>
Hardin et al., 2008	<p><b>Journals:</b> Editors of top 5 finance journals (according to some previous study); but publications from these 5 and additional 16 finance journals were analyzed.</p> <p><b>Editors:</b> Editorial board members (N = 167) from first issue of years 2000 and 2005.</p> <p><b>Years:</b> 1990–2004</p> <p><b>Publications:</b> All type of articles</p> <p><b>The purpose of study:</b> editors’ research productivity, the focus was not solely on self-publishing</p>	<p>For one of the journals, the authors wrote: ‘For Journal of Financial and Quantitative Analysis, only 59.6% of its same board members have at least one appearance in the journal’. For the other journal, Financial Management, the rate was 50%.</p> <p>The authors write ‘In short, as was generally found with the other journals, editorial board members do publish more in the journals on which they serve as an editorial board member when compared with other board members’.</p>	<p>The main output was how often EBMs from top 5 finance journals published in top 21 finance journals. We were not able to extract more info about self-publishing than noted in our results column.</p> <p>Furthermore, editors were selected by using the first issue of the journals for the years 2000 and 2005—while the publications were from 1990–2004, which makes it impossible to draw any conclusions regarding our aims.</p>
Luty et al., 2009	<p><b>Journals:</b> 20 (4 per 5 medical subspecialties).</p> <p><b>Editors:</b> Members of the editorial board (or editorial advisory board)</p> <p><b>Year:</b> 2006</p> <p><b>Publications:</b> Research publications (N = 4,460)</p>	<p>7.7% of the publications were authored by the journal’s own editorial board.</p> <p>2.8% of the publications were authored by ‘one of the three rival journals’ editorial boards within the specialty’.</p> <p>‘There was a statistically significant excess of publications from the journal’s own editorial board in 14 of the 20 journals (<math>p &lt; 0.05</math>)’.</p>	<p>Because ‘each of the journals had similar impact factors within their field’, the authors pointed out that this ‘raises the possibility that editorial procedures are selectively biased in favour of members of their own editorial board’.</p>
Mani et al., 2013	<p><b>Journals:</b> Five leading (according to IF) urologic journals</p> <p><b>Editors:</b> 65 editorial board members who were elected in 2006</p> <p><b>Years:</b> 2001–2010</p> <p><b>Publications:</b> all original reports</p> <p><b>The comparison:</b> pre-editorial period (2001–2005) versus editorial period (2006–2010)</p>	<p>Editors published in total 1800 articles during their pre-editorial period and 2,845 during the editorial period; however, the proportion of publications in their own journal did not differ between periods.</p> <p>An analysis on a journal-level showed that in three journals there were no changes in the rate of self-publications; in one there was an increase (from 20% to 36%) and in one decrease (from 80% to 30%).</p>	<p>The authors have discussed the possibility that self-publishing in a journal with high IF might be tempting for editors. Illegitimate impact factor boosting has also been discussed.</p> <p>The editorial boards for all journals were changed in 2006 providing a unique opportunity for before versus after comparison.</p>

TABLE 1 Continued

Study	Sample/methods	Main results	Comments/notes
Mazov et al., 2018	<b>Journals:</b> 19 top Russian geological journals <b>Editors:</b> Editors-in-chief, deputy editors-in-chief, associate editors, managing editors and secretaries of the editorial board/executive secretaries (N = 434); advisory board members were excluded <b>Years:</b> 'A 3-year period from 2012 to 2015' <b>Publications:</b> type unclear	The only journal showing a significant increase in self-publications had an increase in the impact factor from 2.3 in 2001 to 8.8 in 2010. Across journals, editors published 10%–29% of their own papers in their own journal, making 12/19 of journals the first choice where they publish.	Advisory boards members were excluded because 'they are not mandatory and do not exist in all journals. In addition, this body is advisory in nature and does not play a decisive role in editorial policymaking'. Out of 434 people, '27 people are members of the editorial boards of two journals and 5 work for three journals'. Not clear what kind of publications were included, for example, whether editorials were excluded.
Reaee-Zavareh & Karimi-Sari, 2020	<b>Journals:</b> 'All Iranian medical journals located in the Science Citation Index Expanded (SCIE)' <b>Editors:</b> 'Chairperson, editor-in-chief (EIC), or director in charge of each included journal' <b>Years:</b> Period 1: 2015–2019; Period 2: all years in the database until end of 2019 <b>Publications:</b> articles and reviews	The median number of publications in one's own journal was '17.72 (51.31–30.55) and 19.05 (2.63–36.33) until the end of 2019 and in 2015–2019 respectively'. 'On average, Iranian editors have published 18.90% (SD = 15.03) and 24.98% (SD = 27.45) of their papers in their own journals until the end of 2019 and in 2015–2019 respectively'.	The authors 'did not consider the period that a researcher had been a journal editor', which makes it almost impossible to interpret this study.
Rosenblum et al., 2020	<b>Journals:</b> 13 generalist journals in public administration <b>Editors:</b> 'All editors (including editors-in-chief and co-editors)' <b>Years:</b> 1997–2016 <b>Publications:</b> Empirical articles categorized before, during and after editorship	193 observations among 185 editors (some editors had roles at more than one journal). Self-publishing frequency was related to the author's overall productivity and the length of editorial service. 'The journals with the highest rates of self-publishing are among those with the highest impact factors'. 80/193 editors self-published and 9 of them more than five times.	The authors concluded that self-publishing is not a universal problem, it is 'more of a product of certain journals and individuals'. The authors noted that the final publication date was used which might have led to misclassification in some cases because articles were possible in review before an editor took the role.
Rösing et al., 2014	<b>Journals:</b> Top ten (IF) journals under 'Dentistry, Oral Surgery & Medicine' subject category <b>Editors:</b> editorial board members <b>Years:</b> 2010–2012 <b>Publications:</b> Original research reports	The proportion of articles published by editors in their own journal ranged from 3.8% to 50.3% across journals. Only two journals had a rate below 10%. The number of self-publications was positively related to the journal's IF, number of editorial board members and total number of articles published in a journal.	'Each published issue and article was evaluated manually by one of the authors'. The editorial board members list from 2013 was used for all years.
Sen-Crowe et al., 2020	<b>Journals:</b> 10 journals randomly selected from 200 peer reviewed surgical journals with the highest number of publications <b>Editors:</b> Editorial Board Member (EBM; N = 80) or Associate Editor (AE; N = 721).	For most journals and years, there was an association between the editors' overall productivity and the number of their self-published articles.	Editors were identified on the journal's website at the time of data collection. The authors discussed the potential of the double-blind review process in reducing the bias.

TABLE 1 Continued

Study	Sample/methods	Main results	Comments/notes
Shamsi-Gooshki et al., 2020	<p><b>Years:</b> 2016–2019 <b>Publications:</b> 'Peer-reviewed'</p> <p><b>Journals:</b> Iranian scientific journals approved by the Ministry of Health and Medical Education (N = 408) <b>Years:</b> first issue in year 2018 <b>Editors:</b> only EiCs? <b>Publications:</b> letters to the editor, editorials, corrections and abstracts were excluded <b>The purpose of study:</b> to analyse articles for various 'general and specific indicators related to ethics in publishing research articles'; self-publishing was one of these indicators</p>	<p>The proportion of self-publishing for editors (# of articles in own journal/total # of articles editor published) varied from 2.3% to 27.8% across journals. The only journal with zero significant association 'adheres to a double-blind review process'. 6.6% of articles were authored by editors. The proportion was lower for Persian-language journals than in English-language journals.</p>	<p>The main discussion in the paper is around the association between the editors' total productivity and the number of self-published articles; however, this is of marginal interest if the actual ratio is low.</p> <p>Unclear whether only EiCs were included—the authors write in discussion: 'Although this cutoff also includes editorial board members who have not been investigated in our research...' The authors note that according to the National Guidelines for Publication Ethics 'journal editors and officials are allowed up to 20% authorship in their journal articles'.</p>
Walters, 2015	<p><b>Journals:</b> '30 well-known library and information science journals'—selected using several criteria <b>Editors:</b> Board members who served at any time from January 2007 through December 2012 (N = 1,079) <b>Years:</b> 2007–2012 <b>Publications:</b> All peer-reviewed contributions: 'research articles, research notes, review articles and theoretical/conceptual papers')</p>	<p>Percentage of articles written by board members varied from 1% to 25% across journals with the average of 8%. Overall, 17% of all articles were authored by board members. 'The correlation (r) between a number of board members and percentage of articles written by board members is 0.44'. By using harmonic weighting and standardization procedure (editors' publishing in own journal/their total publications and other authors' publications in the journal/their total publications), the authors reported that '36% of the 1,079 board member authors have actual values higher than their expected values; the rest are especially unlikely to publish in their own journals'.</p>	<p>'Harmonic weighting was used to assign credit for co-authored articles'—this was done based on the number of authors and the author's place in the by-line. One of the most advanced methodological approaches; however, it is unclear when each editor took their role and for how long they served during the 6-year period.</p>
Youk & Park, 2019	<p><b>Journals:</b> 17 journals published by US National (NCA) and the International Communication Association (ICA) <b>Editors:</b> Editors and editorial board members (1,063 individuals; 261 of them had multiple roles leading to the total number of 1,287 observations). <b>Years:</b> 2007–2016 <b>Publications:</b> empirical versus non-empirical</p>	<p>During 10 years, an editor/EBM had on average 1.10 (SD = 1.94) publications in own journal. More than half of the editors/EBMs have not published in their own journal. When self-published articles were written alone, more papers than expected were non-empirical and fewer papers than expected were empirical papers. For the co-authored articles, the pattern was reverse.</p>	<p>The authors did not account for when the editors/EBMs took their positions—ten years is a long period. However, this is not a problem for self-publishing because the overall rate was low. On the other hand, it raises the question about why one becomes the editor/EBM in a journal where they had rarely published before they took the role. Journals had large number of editors, on average 76. It is expected that non-research papers (e.g., editorials) are more often written alone.</p>
Zdeněk (2018)	<p><b>Journals:</b> Six Czech and Slovak Journals indexed in the Journal Citation Report, categories: Business; Business, Finance; and Economics—also six randomly selected Journals with similar IF</p>	<p>The average share of articles, where an editorial board member is the author or co-author, ranges from 0.6% to 17.5% across journals. In some years for some journals, this share reaches 25%.</p>	<p>'The composition of editorial boards was taken from the first issue of the year'.</p>

TABLE 1 Continued

Study	Sample/methods	Main results	Comments/notes
Zdeněk & Lososova, 2018	<p><b>Years:</b> 2012–2015  <b>Editors:</b> editors, editors in chief, executive editors, consulting editors, co-editors, associate editors, members of executive and advisory board and other editorial board members without specified function.  <b>Publications:</b> research articles</p> <p><b>Journals:</b> Ten out of 17 Journals indexed in the Journal Citation Report (category: Agricultural Economics and Policy) were randomly selected</p> <p><b>Years:</b> 2012–2016  <b>Editors:</b> same as in Zdeněk (2018)  <b>Publications:</b> research articles</p>	<p>Across journals, editors publish from 8% to 71% of their articles in their own journal.          Across journals, the proportion of editors publishing only in own journal ranges from zero to 86%.</p> <p>The average share of articles, where an editorial board member is the author or co-author, ranges from 1.3% to 21.1% across journals, with an overall average of 7.7%.          3 out of 10 journals have an average rate above 10%.          The average share of EBMs publishing in their own journal is 14.6%, with the range of 6%–22%.          Across journals, editors publish from 3.3% to 43.6% of their articles in their own journal, with an overall average of 10.1%.          Across journals, the share of EBMs who do not publish at all (according to Web of Science) or publish only in their own journal ranges from 6.1% to 72.7%.</p>	<p>If an EBM published an article in the journal before becoming a member, this article was not counted as in their own journal.</p> <p>*The composition of editorial boards was taken from the first issue of the year*.</p>

(e.g., finance, public administration, surgery, urology), while 5 were focused in scope on a particular country or set of countries.

The prevalence of self-publishing by editors was highly variable between the included studies, ranging from zero to publishing extensively in their own journal, with some editors publishing only in journals where they are editors (Table 1). Various metrics are reported such as the number and proportion of articles in a journal authored by editors; the number and proportion of editors' publications in own journal; the number and proportion of editors that publish in their own journal; the proportion of editors publishing only in their own journal; the likelihood of editors publishing in their own journal versus comparable journals in the field.

For example, in some journals, half of the articles have been contributed by their own editors (Rösing et al., 2014). The proportion of editors that publish only in their own journal has been as high as 86% within a journal (Zdenek, Zdeněk, 2018). However, there was large variability in employed methods and rigour, limiting interpretations and precluding a quantitative summary, for example, by meta-analysis.

## Methodological considerations

First, not all studies carefully considered when editors took on their role as editors. If we are to learn from studies whether editors receive preferable treatment in their own journals, then it is crucial to know exactly when they took on that role. In this respect, Mani et al. (2013) is a unique study as it compares the proportion of publications in own journals between pre-editorial and editorial periods.

Another methodological issue relates to the type of publications included in analyses. In some studies (e.g., Goudra et al., 2018; Hardin et al., Hardin III et al., 2008) all types of articles were included, also editorials. However, it blurs the picture if editorials are counted the same as original papers and systematic reviews in the analysis. Editorials are expected to be written by editors, unless editorials are commissioned. If these article categories are not disaggregated, then no clear conclusions can be drawn regarding whether or not editors are favoured when it comes to having substantial research articles accepted.

A final methodological issue is that in many studies all editors were grouped together without acknowledging differences in power between editors in chief, associate editors and editorial board members. Differences in editorial roles might be relevant if we consider favouritism as one of the main arguments against self-publishing.

## Interpretation and recommendations for future studies

The papers we have reviewed reveal a complex set of motivations for editors to publish in their own journals. Not only can editors potentially benefit from using their position to gain publications as a currency of merit; also journals can benefit from well-known scientists in editorial roles submitting important work

to increase the journal's visibility, quality, and citation rates (Dose & Huber, 2009; Goudra et al., 2018). Thus, there may exist an interplay between editors and journals in the prestige economy of science, where reputation and influence can be exchanged for mutual benefit (Kwiek, 2021).

Our systematic literature review shows that knowledge about the publication practices of journal editors is still limited. The material identified in the survey is quite meagre, and the methods used have considerable limitations. More needs to be learnt about editors' practices of publishing in their own journals. Given the importance of the issue of editors publishing in own journals and the fact that nine of the identified 15 articles have been published after 2017, it can be expected that more studies will follow. Considering the methodological limitations we have identified, we propose several issues to be considered in future research on this topic.

- *When editors took the role.* This is perhaps the most important variable to consider. It is common that before becoming an editor, researchers publish in that specific journal. Therefore, not taking this into account will inevitably lead to partly or completely wrong conclusions. If possible, future studies should compare pre, during, and post period (for still active researchers), but remember to control for seniority (e.g., the increase in overall number of publications).
- *Distinction between editorials and research papers.* Editors are encouraged, often required, to write editorials, which are typically not peer-reviewed, and therefore represent a privilege or duty that the role brings rather than an indicator of preferential treatment.
- *Distinction between editors in chief, associate editors and editorial board members.* The level of power varies between these groups of editors; for example, editorial board members often serve primarily as peer-reviewers and are not involved in editorial processes. Therefore, these groups should be considered separately.
- *Aggregated versus in-depth analysis.* Our analysis did not show evidence for widespread self-publishing overall; however, it also showed that some journals and editors do engage in extensive self-publishing. Therefore, aggregated analysis might fail to identify possibly questionable practices.

## NORMATIVE ANALYSIS

### Ethical guidelines on editors publishing in their own journals

Guidelines on publishing by editors in their own journals have been issued by several professional bodies: the Council of Science Editors, the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE), the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) and the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME).

The Council of Science Editors (CSE) writes in their *White paper on publication ethics* (CSE, n.d.):

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.

Two messages are implicit in this brief statement: first, that CSE does not categorically advise against editors publishing in their own journals and, second, that CSE recommends that they should only do so if listed requirements of an unbiased evaluation procedure can be fulfilled. However, notably there is no comment to the effect that the readership should be made aware of these requirements on the evaluation procedure.

The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE, 2021) write in their *Recommendations for the conduct, reporting, editing and publication of scholarly work in medical journals*:

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.

This is consistent with the CSE position but less far-reaching. Additionally, the *Recommendations* refer to the COPE, which explicitly considers whether editors should publish in their own journal in *A short guide to ethical editing for new editors*:

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.

Thus, the message here is: you can publish in your own journal, but only with caution and with a transparent procedure with safeguards against preferential treatment. COPE further addresses the topic in their *Best practice guideline for journal editors* (COPE, n.d.), in a response to a question:

The issue here basically revolves around whether it is acceptable for editors to publish their own work in their

journals; if it is, then the review process must be made as transparent and rigorous as possible.

COPE adds that it would be suitable for the journal to add a short statement in connection with the publication about the review process. It is clear that there are occasions when COPE finds it acceptable for editors to publish in their own journals, namely 'where the choice of journals is limited'. It remains unclear if this is understood to be the only permissible exception, and how limited the choice of journals has to be for submission by editors to their own journal to be permissible. In the absence of detailed clarification, it nevertheless seems clear that COPE expresses the view that editors' sending manuscripts to their own journal should be the exception.

The World Association of Medical Editors (WAME, n.d.) states, in their 2009 document *Conflict of interest in peer-reviewed medical journals*:

When editors submit their own work to their journal, a colleague in the editorial office should manage the manuscript and the editor/author should recuse himself or herself from discussion and decisions about it.

Hence, on WAME's view, a procedure when editors publish in their own journal involves a strict hands-off approach from the submitting editor. Like the CSE, WAME is silent about the need to transparently communicate this special handling of manuscripts submitted by editors.

In summary, the attitude manifested in these leading publication ethics guidelines is that editors may publish in their own journal, but there must be a procedure in place to ensure that they are not given undue advantages in the review process. In addition, it may be preferable that they do not submit articles to their own journal when there are adequate alternatives.

## Arguments from the literature

In what follows, we present the arguments we have found in the relatively limited literature on the ethics of editors publishing in their own journals, starting with criticism, followed by defence of the practice and specification of conditions that need to be fulfilled to make such practice defensible.

### Arguments against editors publishing in their own journals

One argument against editors publishing in their own journals concerns undue influence over the evaluation of submitted manuscripts: the editor's manuscript may be more likely to be published, even if it has quality issues. As phrased by Richard Smith, former editor of *The BMJ*: 'The argument against is that they [editors] will have undue influence over the process and possibly be able to get inferior work published' (Smith, 2002). Rosenblum et al. (2020) takes the reasoning further by arguing that 'knowingly [...]

bypassing the peer-review process to self-publish constitutes editorial misconduct'. Even if editors do not pressure journal colleagues to accept their work, nor decide about their own manuscript, favouritism may still lead to easier acceptance of submitted papers (Luty et al., 2009). In addition, reviewers may contribute to this favouritism in the sense that they may be less inclined to criticize and value the manuscript on its merits alone if review is not blinded (Sen-Crowe et al., 2020). The mere possibility that editors submitting manuscripts to their own journal receive a more favourable treatment than other researchers may be harmful to the perception of both journal and editor (Walters, 2015).

### Arguments in favour of editors publishing in their own journals

Some of the arguments in defence of editors publishing in their own journal are general and apply equally to all kinds of journals, while some arguments are more specific and apply to more specialized journals or small research fields only. General arguments defending a practice where editors publish in their own journals claim that:

- It would be unfair to editors not to have the opportunity to publish in their journal (Hamilton, Hamilton et al., 2020; Smith, 2002).
- It would risk deterring potential editors if they would not be able to publish in the journal for which they became editors, which threatens to lead to less competent persons taking on the job (Hamilton et al., 2020; Rosenblum et al., 2020).
- Such restrictions would also have negative, and unfair, effects on collaborators of researching editors, since their options are also affected for their joint papers (Hamilton et al., 2020; Hoey, 1999).

Some arguments particularly concern specialized journals or small research fields, such as:

- It would be bad for the readers and the field if they missed specialized content suitable mainly for a specialized journal, if editors in the field were not allowed to publish in their journal (Rosenblum et al., 2020). It has been suggested that some original research may be of main interest to the reader of that specific journal—arguably one should try to publish where the material is most relevant (Hoey, 1999; Smith, 2002; Youk & Park, 2019; Zdeněk & Lososova, 2018).
- It would be bad for the journal to miss the opportunity to publish editors who research and who may very well have been selected as editors for their skill in the field, and whose paper is very much suited for the readership (Hamilton et al., 2020; Smith, 2002).
- It would be particularly unfair to editors if they are not able to publish in what might be the best journal, or one of the most relevant ones, in their special area of competence (Smith, 2002).

Walters (2015), points to a conflict between a desire to publish in the 'right' journal, but at the same time avoiding a conflict of interest:



It seems reasonable to assume that authors will send their papers to the journals that best match their interests, which are presumably the same journals for which they are most likely to serve as board members. At the same time, board members may avoid sending manuscripts to their own journals in order to avoid any real or perceived conflict of interest.

### Proposed conditions and restrictions regarding editors publishing in their own journal

Several voices friendly to the idea that editors publish in their own journal nevertheless express that this practice requires precautions to deal with the problems critics tend to point at.

Editors can legitimately publish a peer-reviewed article in the journal they edit as long as the manuscript undergoes peer review that is as thorough as all other manuscripts, and the member of the editorial board overseeing the peer review does his or her best to ensure that any bias in the assessment of the manuscript is minimized (Young, 2009).

One proposed precaution, also found in the guidelines discussed above, is that editors submitting manuscripts to their own journal should be excluded from all aspects of the review process, in order to guarantee an unbiased evaluation. Several authors have argued that this needs to be ensured by an established mechanism whenever relevant (Graf et al., 2007; Hoey, 1999; Mani et al., 2013).

It has also been suggested, also in line with the guidelines discussed above, that when such publications occur, there should be a statement in the journal explaining the editorial process (Graf et al., 2007). This would include, for example, the name of the associate editor acting as the handling editor even if names of handling editors are not typically mentioned along published articles. Here is an example of such a statement:

Both authors serve as editorial assistant and editor, respectively, of *Cognitive Development*. Neither author was involved in the editorial process for the manuscript and appropriate steps were taken to ensure that both authors were blind to the review process (Caporaso & Marcovitch, 2021).

Some authors have noted that measures to ensure unbiased editorial handling and review also in the case of editors publishing in their own journal ‘cannot absolutely prevent all editorial favoritism’, but they are still meaningful since clear communication to the scientific community of a stable procedure for handling this type of situations ‘might help to maintain and improve journal reputation’ (Mani et al., 2013).

### Arguments advanced in social media

Arguments we have identified in social media both criticize and support that editors publish in their own journals. In brief,

counterarguments include that the evaluation of the papers can be questioned, and that such situations should be avoided, especially when favouritism might tip the balance. It has also been pointed out that the practice of editors publishing in their own journal might reflect negatively both on themselves and on their journals. Publishing in one’s own journal might suggest that one does not dare to face open competition; for the journal, its standards might be questioned by inviting doubt of due procedure when they accept papers from their own editors.

Those defending editors publishing in their own journals stress that bias in editorial handling ought not to be questioned for high-quality papers, especially for editors with a strong publication track record. Others say it is generally acceptable, on the condition that the journal’s review process maintains its integrity. Some suggest special procedures to guarantee this, like a panel of reviewers to make what is otherwise typical editorial decisions. Another kind of defence for editors publishing in their own journal is that sometimes there are no equally good journal alternatives, either because of the unique fit between the kind of paper and the focus of the journal or because the intended readers strongly focus on the concerned journal.

In all, these arguments largely reflect arguments found in the scholarly literature, although they also include many personal experiences and calling out ‘bad’ practices of particular journals and editors.

### Analysis and discussion of arguments

Scientific journals are generally assumed to verify and improve the quality of submitted manuscripts through editorial and peer review, but there is a risk that work by the journal’s own editor would be favouritized and that editorial and peer review would be less stringent, in a manner not transparent to readers. Preferential treatment could also include, for example, faster handling of the submission. It is worth stressing that the risks identified are probably much higher in relation to editors-in-chief compared to editorial assistants and members of the editorial board.

Since the weightiest arguments against letting editors publish in their own journals are that there is a risk that they will be treated favourably, or will be suspected to be treated favourably, it is relevant to consider mechanisms that could mitigate these risks:

- Transparency in the review process allows readers to inspect and appraise the process. Thus, interested readers would be able to form their own opinion about the stringency of review.
- A predetermined procedure for editors’ own submissions should be available in the journal’s information to readers and potential authors, and should be applied to each such case.
- Editors submitting to their own journals should be entirely excluded from any formal influence over the decision-making regarding their own papers.
- The interaction in relation to the paper should also be such that it minimizes informal influence on the handling of the paper.

- Editors and reviewers with a perceived conflict of interest should be left out of the process of evaluation. An editor without such conflict of interest (if such exist) should initiate the protocol.
- To guarantee as far as possible that the assessment of the paper is not influenced by knowledge of who is assessed, evaluation and acceptance/rejection decisions would need to be made by persons who do not know the identities of the authors of the paper, that is, peer reviewers and remaining journal editors alike. This is feasible in relation to peer review, unless the research field is too small to realistically keep the authors secret, and unless the journal's peer review practice is such that hidden identities would deviate from standard procedure and therefore potentially signal what is at stake. Anonymity at an editorial board level may be difficult to achieve if decisions remain in the editorial group normally handling manuscript decisions, not least unless there are other procedural reasons for stepping away from the decision regarding a particular manuscript with reference to conflicts of interest.

A radically different approach to the one pointed out above, concerning editors-in-chief, would be to let the editor assume full responsibility and publish the paper without review. This makes it very clear who is responsible for the content and the decision to publish. On the other hand, the lack of peer review may be perceived as a failure of canonization into the scientific literature. In addition, this is not an acceptable solution for those thinking that the main disadvantage of editors publishing in their own journal is that some may increase their publication merits by making use of a lower entry bar than the rest. The introduction of such a system might indeed have unintended consequences if it would turn out to be 'gamed' by people volunteering as editors for the privilege to publish articles freely, without checks or balances (as pointed out by one of our reviewers).

None of these solutions provides a fully feasible and effective strategy for mitigation against favouritism. Since downsides remain, we recommend that editors-in-chief and perhaps associate editors do not publish original scientific work in their own journal, while this need not be applied to editorial board members who do not make editorial decisions. The cost of not permitting editors-in-chief and associate editors to publish research articles in their own journals will be minimal for the editors themselves and for the research field when other adequate journals are available. In cases where a journal is uniquely attractive for certain kind of research content or with reference to a certain community of readers, the decision is somewhat more delicate. However, with modern technical tools to search for papers using titles, key words, etc., it can be argued that the need to place a paper in a specific journal to have it found by those interested has never been less. Regardless, the benefit-to-cost ratio of a submission ban may be different for associate editors compared with editors in chief, where the former sacrifice as much but gain less in form of prestige. This is even more true for editorial board members.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

According to our findings, the prevalence of editors publishing in their own journals varies greatly between journals. However, except for some clear cases, it is difficult to conclude that compromised peer review for the benefit of editors publishing in their own journal is widespread and therefore would represent a serious threat to the perceived quality of the scholarly literature.

Nevertheless, risks of bias, or perceived bias, in appraisal of submitted manuscripts should and can be reduced by strict editorial procedures for papers submitted by editors. Since risks of favourable treatment cannot be eliminated entirely, the cost of maintaining a practice where editors are allowed to publish in their own journal, in terms of reliability and trust, will have to be weighed against the loss of not permitting this. For exceptions, a strong argument is needed relating to the specific case or circumstances. For the sake of transparency, it is important that the journal's guidelines include clear information about the procedure planned for submissions authored by editors. In conclusion, 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.

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## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization: Gert Helgesson, Gustav Nilsson, and Igor Radun. Systematic review: Igor Radun and Jenni Radun. Writing of original draft: Gert Helgesson. Writing: review and editing: all authors.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

This study received no specific funding. Igor Radun, who is a member of the editorial board of the journal *Transportation Research Part F: Psychology and Behaviour*, humbly reports that he had published three research papers (first author in all of them) in the journal during the 6-year period before he took on the role in this journal in 2015 and six papers (first author in five of them) during 6 years while serving as a member of the editorial board. Other authors report no conflicts of interest.

## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article:

**Appendix S1.** Supporting Information.

**Appendix S2.** Supporting Information.

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