

Special issues: The roles of special issues in scholarly communication in a changing publishing landscape

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Abstract: This paper aims to enhance the understanding of the role of special issues in the evolving landscape of academic publishing, offering insights for publishers, editors, guest editors, and researchers, including how new technologies influence transparency in publishing processes, open access models, and metrics for success. Based upon original analysis, the paper also discusses the importance of special issues and opportunities to support diversity, equity, and inclusivity in special issue publishing programmes. The goal is to contribute to the discussion of maintaining research integrity through special issues, acknowledging their significance in scholarly communication, while offering suggestions for the future.

Keywords: open access, scholarly communication, special issues

INTRODUCTION

The landscape of academic publishing is undergoing a significant transformation, a change driven largely by the rapid evolution of digital technologies. This shift has implications for the role and impact of special issues in scholarly journals. Special issues, also known as themed issues, allow for a more in-depth exploration of a specific topic, bringing together a collection of articles that provide a comprehensive overview of current research and thinking on a subject. In addition to being centred on a well-defined theme, special issues may also be time-sensitive depending on how the theme relates to current events. Themes for special issues often relate to emerging scientific areas, new disciplines, or cross-disciplinary applications or may coincide with special events (such as a special issue on climate change coinciding with Earth Day). As such, they are considered a ‘great way to focus attention on a hot topic’ (Sage, 2021). Journals have also used special issues to focus on topics regarding diversity, equity, and inclusivity including perspectives that address race, ethnicity, and gender,

and respond to national events regarding anti-racism. In today’s evolving publishing environment, the role of the special issue is becoming even more important.

The special issue publishing process is not always transparent and there are a number of questions regarding the quality and research integrity behind the publication of special issues. By reviewing the literature and conducting a brief analysis of special issue publication data from the Web of Science, this paper explores the special issue publishing landscape and the publishing process and addresses the benefits and challenges of publishing, editing, and writing in a special issue. The authors then discuss how special issues are impacted by article processing charges (APCs) and open access publishing models, metrics used to determine success, and initiatives to support diversity, equity, and inclusivity.

This paper aims to provide a better understanding of special issues and their role in scholarly communication and the ever-changing publishing landscape to provide insight for publishers, editors/guest editors, and researchers/authors interested in maintaining the integrity of research.

SPECIAL ISSUE PUBLISHING PROCESS

Below are highlighted pieces of the publishing process that are particularly influential to the success of a special issue.

Call for proposals

Journal editors usually publish a call for proposals for special issue topics with or without a specific theme. In response to calls without a theme, potential guest editors can submit proposals for themes. Other publishers may invite established guest editors to suggest a theme or they may invite speakers from a specialist symposium or conference dedicated, at least partially, to a targeted topic to submit articles for a special issue (Leigh & Edwards, 2022). In response to a request for proposals for special issues, or in an independent initiative, potential guest editors may submit suggestions using an online proposal form or through an email request to the publisher or the journal editor. Contacting the publisher or journal editor with an idea before writing a full proposal has several benefits. For example, the publisher can let potential guest editors know whether a special issue proposal is a good fit for the journal and its readership and whether others have submitted a proposal for a similar topic. Guest editors are usually selected based on their expertise in the field, their ability to network with other experts and their ability to recruit potential contributors and reviewers, as well as their past track record as guest editors. The number of articles in a special issue varies by publisher and journal. For example, Wiley states that special issues are comprised of 10–15 articles, and Elsevier special issues contain 5–20 articles, while special issues in the Springer journal, *Minerva*, are comprised of 6–8 articles and vary among other Springer titles (*Growing Your Journal: Special Issues*, 2023; Guide for Guest Editors | Editors | Elsevier, n.d.; *Minerva*, n.d.). However, most guest editors need to request or consider more articles to account for author incompleteness or reviewer rejection.

Journal editors or guest editors may instead publish a call for papers within a special issue in which a theme has already been determined. For example, the editors of *Learned Publishing* released a call for papers in their special issue of ‘Digital innovations and research integrity—opportunities and risks for scholarly publishing’, inviting researchers and authors to submit articles and case studies relevant to this theme (LP Call for Papers | Digital Innovations and Research Integrity—Opportunities and Risks for Scholarly Publishing, 2023). The editors provided examples of possible topics as well as clear submission deadlines and publication dates.

Submission and peer-review process

Authors may submit their manuscripts to a guest editor instead of the journal editor or platform used by the journal. In this case, the guest editor would manage the peer-review process and may bring in reviewers who are established experts in the field.

Key points

- The publishing process of special issues varies widely by publisher and journal title, adding to the complexity for authors to understand these processes.
- Publication data from Web of Science indicates that the top publishers of special issues are the same leading publishers in the traditional market.
- Researchers with different interests across multiple fields of study and with diverse backgrounds are contributing to special issues, thereby reflecting a diverse range of perspectives.
- Benefits to researchers for publishing in a special issue include potentially higher citation rates and the opportunity to contribute and/or establish one's self in a new or developing field.
- Challenges of publishing a special issue include ensuring the integrity of the research through transparent processes, from the call for papers to the peer-review process, as well as the development of metadata to ensure the findability of articles.
- When it comes to special journal issues, open access publishing models, in particular article processing charges, complicate the publishing landscape and incentives for authors, editors, and reviewers.

The decision-making process for accepting special issues in academic journals varies widely. The decision to approve or not approve a special issue proposal often rests with the Editor-in-Chief. This approach is seen in journals like those published by Oxford Academic, where proposals for special issues are reviewed by the deputy editors to determine if the article fits the scope of the journal and the spectrum of topics that are currently being published by the journal (Call for Special Issue Proposals, n.d.).

Other journals involve committees or editorial boards in the decision-making process. For example, STM (Scientific, Technical, Medical) Journals specify that guest editors, who are responsible for managing papers and ensuring the quality of content, must have a distinguished academic background and a substantial understanding of the subject matter that demonstrates their scholarly contributions. These guest editors are entitled to make final decisions regarding the acceptance and rejection of manuscripts, which implies a collaborative decision-making process involving multiple experts (Special Issue Guidelines STM Journals, n.d.). Some editorial boards may use a voting system to make decisions on which articles to include in a special issue, especially if reviewers have conflicting opinions. Voting may

occur in editorial meetings where either the editor-in-chief or guest editor facilitates the discussion. Some journals may also employ criteria-based voting where reviewers assign scores or votes based on the established criteria, much like using a rubric. Hirschauer (2010) describes voting throughout various stages of the peer-review process in the German *Zeitschrift für Soziologie (Journal of Sociology)* starting with peer reviewers or referees and their judgements about specific articles and then moving to editors and editorial boards and their judgements about those reviews (Hirschauer, 2010). And while Hirschauer does not specifically mention special issues, it would be interesting if a case study could be conducted on special issues of a particular publisher in the future.

For other journals, decisions to accept articles for a special issue are influenced or made by the publisher. This approach might be more common in scenarios where the publisher has a specific strategic direction or market focus. However, detailed examples of this process are not publicly available.

While some publishers of special issues may have a detailed, documented editorial process, others may not. Repiso et al. (2021) describe a debate over supplements in the 1990's where submission processes of supplements to biomedical journals were not the same as for regular articles. This resulted in the publication of articles at a much lower quality. In sum, the quality of the peer review and the editing process, will vary by publisher and by individual journals, editors, guest editors, and others involved in the editorial process.

Production and publication

Following a specific deadline, the special issue is published either as a separate issue or as a section within a regular issue of the journal.

Promotion and dissemination

The publisher, guest editors, contributing authors, and their professional network contacts may promote the special issue through various channels such as individual social media accounts, networks, email newsletters, and conference presentations. Facilitating post-publication discussions and engagement through comment sections, social media platforms, and academic events can create a lasting impact and extend the reach of the special issue.

FIGURE 1 Top six special issue publishers 2018–2022 (Clarivate, 2023).

Publisher	Record Count of Articles with Designation as “Special Issues”	% of Total Record Count of 35,142 Articles
Elsevier	6780	19.29
Taylor & Francis	4441	12.64
Springer Nature	4089	11.64
MDPI	3784	10.77
Wiley	2952	8.40
Sage	2040	5.81

PUBLISHING LANDSCAPE

The publishing landscape is key to understanding special issues. The Core Index within Web of Science which includes the following journal citation indexes: Science Citation Index Expanded, Social Sciences Citation Index, Arts & Humanities Citation Index, and Emerging Sources Citation Index was consulted to discover more information about publications designated as special issues between 2018 and 2022. The database documents 35,142 articles with a designation of ‘special issue’. The top six publishers of special issue articles were Elsevier, Taylor & Francis, Springer Nature, MDPI, Wiley, and Sage—publishers who also dominate the market for traditional journal issues. See Fig. 1.

The top six journals that publish special issues are *Neuropharmacology*, *Applied Sciences Basel*, and *Neuroscience*, followed by *Sustainability*, the *International Journal of Molecular Sciences*, and *IEEE Transactions on Computer Aided Design of Integrated Circuits*. See Fig. 2.

Using the Web of Science Categories, the top 11 subjects written on in special issues are environmental sciences, engineering electrical/electronic, educational research, management, materials science, neurosciences, economics, applied physics, computer science information systems, and business. See Fig. 3.

These results show that researchers with different interests across multiple fields of study are contributing to special issues from a variety of publishers. A limitation to this brief view of special issues is that it only includes journals that are indexed in Web of Science. It does not include journals that are indexed elsewhere. More research needs to be done from other data providers for a fuller picture of special issues.

BENEFITS

There are many benefits to publishing, editing, and contributing to a special issue for every stakeholder in the process. Journal publishers use special issues to draw attention to a topic or theme that interests a niche academic community. Published articles may be cited more frequently and can drive the journal's impact factors higher while reaching a new audience. Studies in health sciences using the Web of Science database indicate that special issues positively influence immediate citations, overall citations, and impact factors compared to regular issues (Smith et al., 2012). According to Elsevier's analysis, ‘Special content articles attract 20% more citations in the first 24 months than

Publication Titles	Record Count of Articles in Journals that Publish “Special Issues”	% of Total Record Count of 35,142 Articles
Neuropharmacology	423	1.20
Applied Sciences Basel	401	1.14
Neuroscience	261	0.74
Sustainability	197	0.56
International Journal of Molecular Sciences	157	0.45
IEEE Transactions on Computer Aided Design of Integrated Circuits and Systems	155	0.45

FIGURE 2 Top six special issue journal publications 2018–2022 (Clarivate, 2023).

Web of Science Categories	Record Count of Articles with Designation as “Special Issues”	% of Total Record Count of 35,142 Articles
Environmental Sciences	1340	3.81
Engineering Electrical Electronic	1323	3.77
Educational Research	1273	3.62
Management	1271	3.62
Materials Science Multidisciplinary	1246	3.55
Neurosciences	1225	3.49
Economics	1210	3.44
Computer Science Information Systems	1161	3.30
Physics Applied	1090	3.10
Business	1086	3.09
Political Science	1068	3.04

FIGURE 3 Top 11 Web of Science categories of articles published in special issues 2018–2022 (Clarivate, 2023).

articles published in regular issues’ (Elsevier Guest Editor Guide, 2024). On the other hand, Conlon et al. found that special issues disproportionately increased citations for less prominent journals and less-published scholars than for their better-established counterparts (Conlon et al., 2006). Analyses published by other researchers show that articles published as part of a special issue garner similar or modestly lower citation rates than regularly published articles (Hendry, 2016). When guest editors use social media, cross-disciplinary networks, and professional organizations to promote them, articles in special issues may reach more readers. Special issues may strategically raise the journal’s profile as a leading source of information on a particular topic and advance the research field by focusing on the most innovative topics while encouraging inclusive research.

In addition to citation analysis, altmetrics can also be used to determine reach and interest. This includes tracking online engagement on social media such as shares, likes, comments, and discussion on posts as well as mentions in the media including news outlets as well as mentions in policy documents. Usage data from websites such as page views and time spent on articles in addition to download counts can provide insight into impact. Altmetrics are also a good way to identify influential articles that are gaining interest online, but have not existed long enough for others to cite in their research. Some publishers now display

altmetric scores along with articles including those in special issues to provide a comprehensive view of each article’s reach and engagement across online platforms. For example, BMJ’s website for *Heart* pulls statistics from Altmetric.com, showing how many X (formerly Twitter) users posted the article and how many readers are on Mendeley. The altmetric score is shown as a number within a coloured wreath at the end of each full text article online and ‘reflects the immediate attention received by a research paper as evidenced by articles in news outlets and commentary on blogs, as well as the number of tweets and other digital communications’ (Otto, 2015). A summary can also be pulled to view more demographics.

Benefits also accrue to guest editors, contributing authors, and readers of special issues. Guest editors may benefit from a special issue by establishing themselves as leaders in a new field. Contributing authors may reach a new or a more targeted audience, increase their citation frequency, develop new collaboration efforts with other investigators or peer reviewers, or maximize their research impact. Some, but not all, special issues have higher acceptance rates than regular submissions (Hendry, 2016). These benefits can be particularly important for early-career and less-published researchers looking to establish themselves in their field of investigation. Readers profit from the ‘one-stop shopping’ of a special issue, which offers diverse current perspectives on an

emerging topic (Leigh & Edwards, 2022). Although anyone at any career stage seeking to build knowledge in a domain can benefit from reading a special issue, the information in special issues can be particularly useful for those entering the field, such as graduate students (Mowday, 2006) (Leigh & Edwards, 2022).

CHALLENGES

There are also many challenges in publishing, editing, contributing to, and in some cases discovering special issues. Successful special issues are highly reliant on the network, ability, and experience of the guest editor/s. Knöchelmann et al. (2022) state that ‘the journal’s name and published content and the names of the editors who select the content to be published are mutually dependent’. They go on to say that ‘Editorial boards tie names from a field to a journal and at the same time the name of the journal is linked to the positions of the editors in the field’ (Knöchelmann et al., 2022). It can be inferred that this is then linked back to the content and perhaps who is submitting articles to the special issue. Thus, not having an existing network in place may make it difficult for guest editors to create a successful special issue of a journal and may influence or reduce the scope of a journal in the publication of special issues.

Guest editors for special issues face their own set of challenges. New guest editor/s may not be as familiar with the editorial policies and procedures of a journal as the journal’s editor might be. This lack of familiarity can make it more difficult for guest editors to manage the peer-review process, ensure that the articles meet the journal’s standards for quality and relevance, and ensure that the special issue is produced on time.

One may encounter a steep learning curve if one is not already an experienced editor knowledgeable about recruiting authors or reviewers. The guest editor must, for example, recruit more contributing authors to compensate for incompletions and rejections. This can be problematic when the theme is ‘trailblazing’, as there is not yet an established community of researchers around these nascent topics making it difficult to obtain enough manuscripts. It may also be difficult to obtain enough reviewers for an effective peer-review process due to a shortage of available scholars and while this may vary by discipline, it is evident in fields like experimental psychology and digital learning (Flaherty, n.d.). If an article is representing a new concept not previously published on, fact checking may also be challenging as the information may not exist in any other sources. While this may make it difficult to ensure integrity, it does ensure the novelty and innovative approach to research, solidifying the need for a special issue.

The needs of guest editors may come into conflict with the needs of the journal. Knöchelmann et al. (2022) state that ‘high ranking journals and guest editors seem to be an odd couple, at least in the long run, as the thematic clustering of articles will be detrimental to the goal of only publishing the best work within a research field and, consequently, reject most submissions’. This is difficult for special issues in that acceptance is usually based on the theme over quality. And yet, challenges for special issues in

low-ranking journals may be more about finding the benefit for the authors.

Another challenge comes in publishing conference special issues. While the process of publishing conference proceedings in a special issue facilitates the receipt of submissions, it excludes anyone who did not participate in the conference from contributing to the special issue (Repiso et al., 2021). While direct benefits to the journal may not be evident, conference special issues do support ‘a collective scientific endeavor that brings researchers together in a shared arena to exchange ideas’ (Hendry, 2016). In addition to conference proceedings, special issues focusing on a topic particularly relevant to a specific professional association may inadvertently exclude researchers who are not part of that association or formal network.

If conference proceedings or special issues produce a small number of accepted articles, editors may choose to include in a special section of the regular journal or create a supplement instead of creating a special issue. ‘According to Delgado et al., when special issues are supplements containing unpublished papers (e.g., conference proceedings) the editorial management is handled very differently from that of regular issues; the review process is also different (in some cases, non-existent), and thus the use of a different ISSN is generally recommended’ (Repiso et al., 2021). This ensures that articles that are expected to have lower impact will not affect the overall impact score of the journal title (Repiso et al., 2021). If publishers create a separate publication to protect the integrity of the main journal, one must wonder if they question the integrity of those articles included in the special issue.

If special issues are assigned an ISSN that is different from the main journal title, it may be more challenging for readers to find the material. Readers and searchers may not know the title in order to search for it. While these metadata choices will not affect the impact and integrity of the main journal title, they will potentially hinder the findability or the impact of the special issue. Special issues in general can be more difficult to index and catalogue than regular issues of a journal as they may be catalogued independently from the regular publication title. This can make it more difficult for readers and researchers to find them. For example, Haworth Press, the publisher of the *Journal of Homosexuality* publishes special issues of the journal both in the serial title and as individual book titles. Librarians at The William Madison Randall Library at the University of North Carolina Journal discovered that they had access to this material in their subscription to the journal title, but it was not discoverable as the book title in their catalogue. This led to a complete analysis of how these titles were entered in their system and resulted in re-cataloguing the titles as books so that library users could find them (Wu & Hayes, 2005). There are many other publishers and journal titles that have both an ISSN and ISBN for special issue content, making it challenging to discover if both titles are not known. On the other hand, once a reader does find a special issue it may be easier to learn about the topic as a whole in one issue rather than trying to search for keywords across multiple journals and potentially disciplines (Mowday, 2006).

The overall submission, review, and publication process for special issues may be confusing for authors. Plakhotnik (2021) studied the communication clarity in calls for papers issued by peer-reviewed journals for special issues. The author found that guest editors vary greatly in their approaches to crafting calls for papers and 'identified a number of inconsistencies, inaccuracies, omissions, and redundancies that could confuse or discourage potential contributors' (Plakhotnik, 2021). To assist in communication clarity Plakhotnik found that most editors acknowledge a research question or problem to address, state the purpose in one sentence, provide, state a preferred methodology and level of analysis, provide a list of potential topics, and state the number of recommended sources. It is hoped that by providing clarity in the initial call for papers the quality and integrity of articles received for submission will also increase.

There are also philosophical questions to consider, such as whether special issues shift the open marketplace of journals towards a 'command economy' of ideas by prioritizing certain topics over others (Priem, 2006). Priem's main argument is that too many special issues will suppress innovation by 'squeeze[ing] out quality articles on other topics that otherwise would have appeared in regular issues' (Priem, 2006). However, electronic/online journals may not have the page limit or cost restrictions that prevent print journals from expanding or including more articles and pages, so that it could be argued that rather than suppressing innovation, special issues actually encourage and foster it.

There has been concern about the quality of articles published in special issues compared to that of articles published in regular issues of the journal. In their review of special issues, Olk and Griffith (2004) reported that some of the journal editors they contacted expressed concerns about the quality of special issue articles. Others raised concerns that the acceptance rates for special issues might be higher than those for regular submissions to the same journals (Smith, 1999). If higher acceptance rates equate to special issues being less selective, articles of lower-than-typical quality could be published, and these articles would be likely to have less impact than articles in regular issues of the same journals (Conlon et al., 2006).

Quality of special issue submissions also seems to be affected by paper mill submissions. This concern was highlighted by Hindawi and parent company Wiley's identification and resulting retraction of over 1200 articles due to a claimed compromised peer-review process (Kincaid, 2023). Similarly, Clarivate removed over 50 journals including 19 Hindawi/Wiley journals from their Web of Science Index, which calculates journal impact factors, for not meeting their quality criteria (Flynn, 2023; Kincaid, 2023). Hindawi claims this is a 'direct result of sophisticated paper mill activity' (Flynn, 2023). Paper mills are profit oriented organizations that produce and sell fraudulent manuscripts resembling genuine research to publishers. The problem of paper mills is made evident in a study by (Candal-Pedreira et al., 2022) in which they identified 1182 retracted paper mill papers, most of these papers were in the second highest impact factor rating from Web of Science's Journal Citation Reports and the majority

were affiliated with a Chinese institution and/or a hospital. 'Not only does this issue entail the sale of authorship, but these types of papers have also been observed to contain fabricated and manipulated data and images, thus disseminating false results in scientific literature' (Candal-Pedreira et al., 2022). Similarly, 'COPE and STM undertook a study with Maverick Publishing Services, using data from publishers, to understand the scale of the problem of paper mills' (Paper Mills Research, 2022). Data on over 53,000 papers were analysed, spanning six publishers and a wide range of subject areas; suspect papers being submitted to journals range from 2% to 46% with a projection that journals will see 2% suspected fake papers submitted in the future (Paper Mills Research, 2022). While not evident in these studies, it would be interesting to discover what percentage of these retracted and suspect articles were originally published in a special issue of a journal.

Generative artificial intelligence (AI) services such as ChatGPT and image-generating software are 'complicating publishers' efforts to tackle the growing problem of paper mills' and make them more difficult to detect (Liverpool, 2023). Recommended actions from research-integrity experts include educating editors about the problem of paper mills, investing in tools to detect suspected papers, engage with funders to review incentives for researchers to publish valid papers, investigate protocols to impede paper mills, review retraction process, and investigate how to ensure that retraction notices are applied to preprint services and repositories (Paper Mills Research, n.d.).

APCS AND OPEN ACCESS

Special issues published open access face a particular challenge with establishing integrity and quality when not only the articles and research are published open access, but the entire journal is open. It can be challenging for both guest editors and authors to determine how or if special issues fit within the regularly published journal title. Some questions that may arise are whether or not the special issue has separate publishing fees or APCs than the regular journal and whether as well as expectations for the guest editor regarding these fees. It is extremely important that pricing and expectations are transparent as this contributes to the overall perception and trust in research published, especially that in special issues.

Cost and financial implications

While costs can be less with the publishing of online open-access journals including special issues, fewer resources for funding and technical support also exist (Wang et al., 2019). Wang et al. (2019) also explore the question 'Who bears the costs and who profits?' This may be especially confusing for researchers and authors publishing in special issues regarding who pays for APCs. APCs are usually paid by the author or the author's research funder or organization for each published paper (Hindawi) (Journal Pricing | Elsevier Policy, n.d.). The APC is the same

amount as a regular submission to the journal the Special Issue is in (Lithosphere, 2024) (IET Special Issue Guidelines, n.d.). However, this may not be the case for every publisher and every journal.

In some cases, guest editors may be responsible for covering this fee. This should be addressed by guest editors with the general editor of the publication to prevent confusion later on. The clarification should also be provided to authors of articles in the special issue as early in the process as possible, perhaps even upfront in the call for papers. More research needs to be done to determine publishers and/or journals publishing special issues that may have different payment requirements and expectations regarding APCs.

Special issue authors and guest editors should be aware that APCs can be a revenue stream and turn a profit for some publishers. According to research done by Butler et al. (2023), the scientific community paid Elsevier, Sage, Springer-Nature, Taylor & Francis and Wiley '\$1.06 billion in OA publication fees, \$612.5 million for gold, and \$448.3 million for hybrid OA, totaling 505,903 articles publishing in 6,252 journals from 2015-2018' (Butler et al., 2023). The fees may incentivize editors/guest editors to increase the number of articles published especially in special issues, which may attract a significant number of submissions depending on the topic, becoming a convenient way to boost publication numbers and, by extension, revenue. Grossmann and Brems (2021) found that APCs between \$200 and \$1,000 per article could sustain an OA Gold journal; with an APC of \$500 achieving a 10% profit margin (Grossmann & Brems, 2021). Further research needs to be done to determine estimated profit margins specifically for special issues and acceptance rates considering OA models.

Predatory publishing practices

'With the rise of open access and the movement to publish articles only online, an increasing number of publishers and journals that exploited the OA model emerged' (Richtig et al., 2018). 'A negative result of OA support by APC is the advent and proliferation of the predatory journal, sometimes defined as a journal with little oversight, high acceptance rate, and high APC' (Wang et al., 2019). Predatory journal publishers can acquire legitimate indexed publications and may contact academic authors directly via email, preying on the well-known publish or perish phenomenon present in academia.

'Special Issues have become a prime target for unethical and fraudulent publication activity, and the use of a Guest Editor model in which the journal editorial team is not involved in the peer-review process has made Special Issues increasingly vulnerable to paper mills, fake or "gifted" authorship, and other dubious publishing practices' (Aumiller & Newman, 2023). Aliukonis et al. (2020) studied authorship misuse including ghost authorship in scientific publications and note that the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME) refers to the main threat of ghost authorship as persuading readers in favour of a special interest

(WAME, 2005). Special issues seem a natural target for this type of author misuse in that 'peer-reviewed journals may be distorted by the bias of different interest groups thus leading to loss of credibility' (Aliukonis et al., 2020).

Integrity and trust in research

To help ensure the integrity of special issues, publishers like ACS and Emerald Publishing provide detailed guidelines for guest editors. ACS emphasizes that guest editors should work closely with the journal's editorial team but do not oversee the peer-review process themselves, ensuring that peer review and final decisions are made by contracted editors to maintain fairness and integrity (Aumiller & Newman, 2023). Emerald Publishing outlines processes for submitting proposals for special issues and specifies evaluation times to ensure thorough planning and integration with the journal's aims (Guidelines for Special Issue Guest Editors—JEIM, 2024).

Many tools and lists have been developed to help authors navigate and avoid predatory journals if desired (Richtig et al., 2018). This includes the Think Check Submit website that 'aims to educate researchers, promote integrity, and build trust in credible research publications' (Identify Trusted Publishers for Your Research • Think. Check. Submit., n.d.). The Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) includes a list of OA journals that 'conform to criteria related to quality, oversight, and sustainability' (Richtig et al., 2018). The GAJET List is a list of 'good journals' in the medical field to help fight 'against not only predatory publishing but also abusive practices by commercial academic publishers who earn money from authors, peer-reviewers, and editors who work for commercial publishers for free' (GAJET List, n.d.). One would like to think that the main journal titles listed in these resources would extend to special issues, but this will depend on the publisher and the journal and whether or not these policies are stated and/or exist.

While author tools are important, receiving what seems to be a personalized email requesting either an article or interest in being a guest editor of what appears to be a special issue of an existing journal, can be flattering and reassuring that one's work matters. It can be difficult for authors not to fall into this trap. These predatory journals as well as other author misuse further complicate and add to questions surrounding the integrity of the research included in and of the special issue itself.

The shift to an OA publishing landscape will affect publishing, editors, and authors as they navigate what can be a complicated system. Special issues may highlight the importance of these topics, discuss challenges, and showcase successful implementations to promote transparency and collaboration. The challenges of funding APCs in the future will also become more apparent as more funder mandates are put in place. While research that is funded has the potential to cover publication fees, what does this mean for research that is not funded? How will these researchers afford the publication fees?

DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSIVITY IN SPECIAL ISSUES

Special issues may, more easily than regular issues, incorporate culturally relevant approaches such as diverse perspectives, experiences, and voices into their themes, topics, and content. This approach can be achieved through collaborative partnerships, inclusive themes and topics, and community engagement. Guest editors, reviewers, and contributing authors from diverse backgrounds and disciplines can be prioritized to ensure that the special issue reflects a range of perspectives and experiences. Special issues can be designed to explore themes and topics relevant to diverse communities and populations. For example, a special issue on health disparities may explore ways in which race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status impact health outcomes. The journal *Clinical Practice in Pediatric Psychology* published a special issue on clinical approaches to address health disparities in paediatric psychology that focused on the effective delivery of services for children and adolescents from racial, ethnic, and low-income backgrounds (McQuaid & Everhart, 2020).

Special issues have the flexibility to adopt an intersectional approach, which considers how different social identities intersect and impact experiences and outcomes. For example, a special issue on gender may explore how gender intersects with race, ethnicity, and other factors to shape healthcare inequities and challenges. The *Journal of Family Violence* published a special issue about Transformative Research Methods in Gender-Based Violence to 'explore how researchers, evaluators, and practitioners use community-based, participatory research approaches to prevent gender-based violence, support survivors, and transform communities and systems' (Nnawulezi et al., 2018). Finally, special issues can involve community members and stakeholders in the research and publication process to ensure that the research is culturally relevant and responsive to community needs.

On the other hand, if special issues are not consciously developed in part to achieve a goal of inclusiveness, the opposite result may ensue. The special issue editor is likely a central player in this social network (which is why they were chosen to be the special issue editor in the first place), and the reviewers for the special issue and the authors who submit papers for it are part of this insular set the so-called 'in-crowd' thus decreasing inclusiveness in such invited special issues (Olk & Griffith, 2004) (Conlon et al., 2006).

FUTURE TRENDS

Looking ahead, several trends are likely to shape the academic publishing landscape and the role of special issues in scholarly communication. Generative AI tools such as ChatGPT have already been used as a research assistant to 'generate ideas, suggest research questions, and provide context and background information for researchers' (Lo, 2023). And while this tool is not

limited to assisting authors and editors of special issues, it has the potential to assist in the development of themes for editors and enhance research questions for authors.

Some AI tools can assist authors in polishing their work. For example, 'a writer can submit a roughly written draft to a generative AI platform using large language models (LLMs) and a more sophisticated written output could be produced and ultimately submitted' (Wong, 2023). This could be useful to authors who want to change the tone of an article to fit a specific style of a journal or if the author wants to emphasize certain themes in the article to fit the scope of a special issue. Other AI tools like Research Rabbit can help enhance a publication by offering similar citations and articles of interest, while Scite.ai can offer citations and references based on the need of a statement in support or dissent. These tools can be useful and save researchers time conducting literature searches and finding support and or evidence for their research.

Does this mean that AI tools like ChatGPT or Research Rabbit should be listed as an author? Journal editors and publishers are debating this and working on policies to handle this evolving trend. This includes the top publishers of special issues mentioned earlier: Elsevier, Taylor & Francis, Springer Nature, and MDPI. All agree that AI should not be listed as an author. Taylor & Francis and Nature say that use of an AI tool should be listed in an acknowledgment or methods section of the paper, while MDPI states 'Authors are fully responsible for the originality, validity, and integrity of the content of their manuscript, including any material contributed by AI or AI-assisted tools, and must ensure, through careful review, that this content complies with all MDPI's publication ethics policies' (Elsevier, 2024; MDPI, 2024; Robinson, 2023; Stokel-Walker, 2023).

AI tools can also assist editors through various stages of the publishing process. Frontiers' Artificial Intelligence Review Assistant (AIRA) claims to improve the quality of the manuscript, reduce 'reviewer fatigue', match editors to articles, and connect reviewers with funding proposals (Lazarus, 2021). This description sounds interesting in relation to special issues especially for matching editors to articles for more niche topics. SciScore is another AI tool that can be used to analyse the methods section of research articles and provide feedback for improvement. American Association for Cancer Research (AACR), for example, used SciScore to enhance research reproducibility by accurately reporting materials with research resource identifiers (RRIDs). (Lazarus, 2021). These cases illustrate AI's potential in addressing various editorial challenges, improving manuscript quality, and streamlining the publication process.

CONCLUSIONS

While there are many challenges about special issues, from quality and integrity of research, discoverability of new titles, and engaging readers and authors with innovative topics, the benefits of drawing attention to new ideas and potentially creating new networks of researchers to expand and diversify thinking are

worth the risks. Acknowledging the challenges and recognizing potential errors in special issues by following Retraction Watch as well as trends in OA publishing will help keep researchers, authors, and publishers informed and assist in contributing and publishing the best quality of research possible. The authors of this paper also suggest that publishers and editors/guest editors follow best practices provided by The Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) as they are 'committed to educating and supporting editors, publishers, universities, research institutes, and all those involved in publication ethics' (About COPE, n.d.) and the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) for recommendations for conduct, reporting, editing, and publication of scholarly work in medical journals (ICMJE, 2024). Other organizations that support equitable research and access to research including research published in special issues are:

- Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition (SPARC)
- Association of University Presses (AUPresses)
- International Association of Scientific, Technical, and Medical Publishers (STM)
- The Open Access Scholarly Publishers Association (OASPA)
- Research4Life

In addition to following the above resources, some suggestions for editors and editorial teams to support best practices in producing special issues include:

- Developing a clear call for papers/articles to reach a wide audience and encourage submissions from a diverse group of researchers
- Articulating the goals, themes, and scope of the special issue in the call for papers/articles
- Maintaining and communicating a transparent peer-review process for authors and reviewers
- Assembling a diverse editorial team and pool of reviewers
- Offering mentorship opportunities to new authors and to new guest editors
- Providing constructive feedback to authors
- Providing a tool to help authors understand and choose open access options for articles accepted for publication

Special issues can effectively communicate research and contribute to scholarly discourse in various fields through relevant themes and promote emerging and developing ideas. The future trajectory of special issues will ultimately depend on dynamic evolution of research, societal needs, and the publishing landscape as well as continuing research into special issues themselves.

Potential future research into special issues include:

- Discovering statistics and historical rates based on field or discipline for special issues

- Comparing special issues publishing processes between publishers
- Analysing articles published in special issues and the type of open access licences chosen compared to that of the regular journal
- Determining estimated profit margins for special issues and acceptance rates for subscription models to the advent of APCs and OA models
- Delving into the topics published in special issues to determine what extent they are supporting claims of diversity, equity, and inclusivity
- Investigating personal experiences of guest editors in the editorial process of special issues
- Discovering and comparing the percentage of retracted articles published in a special issue of a journal to that of the regular journal title.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

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