

Article

Potential Editor–Author Conflicts of Interest: To Edit or Not To?

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Abstract: In recent years, the scientific community and its publications have come under scrutiny due to scandals involving the “publish or perish” culture, the dissemination of fabricated data, the emergence of paper mills, fraudulent peer review and the prevalence of low-quality publications. While various issues such as these have been highlighted in the literature, the role of the editor(s) in potential problematic or unethical situations has received only limited attention, especially the topic of editor–author conflicts – particularly cases where editors previously co-authored with one of the authors they are supposed to be evaluating – receives relatively little to no attention. Yet, recently a massive retraction of 43 papers involving potentially unethical editorial work and a very specific editor–author conflict reached headlines, indicating the importance of addressing this.

Keywords: conflict of interest; editor; research integrity; author; ethics

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Introduction

Scientific publications have long been a cornerstone of academia (Lee, 2014; McGrail et al., 2006). The quest to share knowledge and inform others, whether through drawing or writing, has persisted throughout human history (Miyagawa et al., 2018). However, an additional phase separates the act of writing from publishing in scientific disciplines: the peer-review process. The peer-review system, as we recognize it today, originated in the

nineteenth century (Baldwin, 2015; Moxham & Fyfe, 2018; Resnik & Elmore, 2016), but it has often been criticized for its deficiencies (Csiszar, 2016; Hamilton et al., 2020; Resnik & Elmore, 2016).

While fraud has plagued science and publishing throughout history, retractions (as we know them now) are a relatively modern phenomenon with an upturn in retractions in recent years (McCook, 2016; Hu et al., 2025; Parron Fernandes et al., 2023), leading to an escalation of concern regarding the integrity of scientific publishing. This concern is fueled by the “publish or perish” culture, predatory publishing, organized paper mills, problematic special issues, review mills, citation mills and large-scale fraudulent activities (Alhuthali & Sayed, 2022; Besançon et al., 2024; Dadkhah et al., 2017; Downes, 2020; Giray, 2024; Hensel, 2021; Horbach & Halffman, 2019; Khajuria & Agha, 2013; Mills et al., 2024; Oviedo-García, 2024). Furthermore, several recent high-profile fraud cases have made international headlines, fostering distrust in academia (Berggren & Karabag, 2019; Casassus, 2022; Frank et al., 2023; Larregue, 2022; Vasconez-Gonzalez et al., 2024). While discussions in the scientific literature have extensively covered topics such as paper mills, citation manipulation, the proliferation of fraudulent data (Abalkina & Bishop, 2023; Besançon et al., 2024; Candal-Pedreira et al., 2022; Giray, 2024; Horbach & Halffman, 2019; Khajuria & Agha, 2013) and to an extent the role of peer review(ers) (Drozd & Ladomery, 2024; Horbach & Halffman, 2018), conflicts of interest involving editors have received less attention (Cooper et al., 2006; Haivas et al., 2004; Resnik & Elmore, 2018). A limited number of studies have examined the potential conflicts of interest (COIs) that arise when editors (in chief) publish in their own journals (Besançon et al., 2021; Helgesson et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2023; Moussa, 2022), explored how editors perceive their role in the review process (Hamilton et al., 2020), studied editorial bias (García et al., 2015; Moustafa, 2015; Sarigöl et al., 2017; Tutuncu, 2024) and financial editorial COIs (Murayama, 2024; Ralph et al., 2020); however, little to no attention has been given to editor–author conflicts: a type of non-financial COI, especially those concerning editors that previously co-authored together with at least one author of the paper they are editing (Cooper et al., 2006; Desai & Shortell, 2011; Radun, 2023; Sarigöl et al., 2017; Young, 2009). Although authors’ COIs are usually regarded as critical and often obligatory to report, the standards for editors disclosing potential COIs are not as robust (Cooper et al., 2006; Dal-Ré et al., 2019; Haivas et al., 2004; Young, 2009). Yet, editors serve as the gatekeepers of scientific publishing, determining the validity of reported COIs from the authors and as such play a vital role in maintaining the quality and integrity of published literature (Desai & Shortell, 2011; Ferris & Fletcher, 2010; Johnson, 1996; Marusic, 2010; Pan, 2020).

This paper aims to address the particular issue of COIs between editors and authors, to advocate for journals and publishers to adopt a more rigorous enforcement of their guidelines regarding COIs and to install extra guidelines to avoid problematic situations.

A Publisher’s View on Potential Editor–Author Conflicts

While most publishers and editorial organizations have established guidelines that include specific considerations for editors (see Table S1), the details regarding potential conflicts of interest among editors are not always clearly defined (Haivas et al., 2004; Teixeira da Silva et al., 2019) and are sometimes ignored (Sarigöl et al., 2017) or treated differently by publishers. Recently, *The Hindu* reported on an author, who was also the initial handling

editor of a journal's papers, facing the retraction of 43 papers in that one journal due to potentially unethical editorial practices, including COIs as he was handling papers even when his name was added as an author. In all 43 instances, that editor's name was added to the authors list during the editorial/review process, after which he continued to edit the manuscripts for the majority of these papers. According to the publisher and an independent ethics advisor this was a violation of the journal's policies on authorship and COIs related to the submission and review of these papers. However, the editor/author blames the journal's manager for the problematic situation, since the journal's manager kept assigning the manuscripts to him, even though his name was added as an author (Prasad, 2024). Even more recently, the publisher Frontiers issued 122 retractions related to a peer-review manipulation network in which authors and editors collaborated together to publish papers. Potentially more than 4,000 articles, published across seven other publishers, can be tracked to this network (Frontiers, 2025). Furthermore, several papers in other journals have also recently been retracted for editor–author COIs. Most of these papers also had reviewer–author COIs. For the majority of the papers the authors, however, disagree with the retraction and dispute the grounds for it or did not respond when notified about the retraction. Only on one occasion did a single author of a retracted paper agree with the retraction. Five of the papers involved a situation where the editor was also an author of the paper (Table S2). Contrary to the aforementioned example, another journal issued a mass correction, declaring potential COIs, where editors and/or reviewers were linked to authors, for almost 100 articles due to potential COIs; they issued no retractions (Geological Journal, 2025).

So, while most publishers do have a set of guidelines specifically for editors regarding COIs, several sets provide few details and are open to different interpretations (Table S1) or are not strictly enforced. Publishers also often refer to the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) for guidance. COPE, however, does not have a document on COIs specifically for editors, but refers to the Ethical guidelines for peer reviewers and mentions that these should also be applied to handling editors. Specifically, COPE mentions the following to be applicable for editors as well:

Competing interests may be personal, financial, intellectual, professional, political or religious in nature. If you are currently employed at the same institution as any of the authors or have been recent (e.g., within the past 3 years) mentors, mentees, close collaborators or joint grant holders, you should not agree to review' (COPE, 2024; COPE Council, 2013).

One of the publishers that does provide a clear overview is Frontiers. It provides a list of potential COIs for editors (Table 1).

One particular COI regarding 'Collaborations' is the statement: 'Are you currently collaborating or have you collaborated on a research project or a publication with any of the authors within the past 2 years?' This means that according to Frontiers, a potential conflict of interest arises when editors handle a manuscript by an author with whom they previously co-authored a paper within a 2-year time frame. In comparison, COPE guidelines mention a three-year time period. Two publishers, ACS publications and PLOS, apply more stringent rules: collaborations five years prior (Table S1). An author editing his or her own paper is an extreme case of an author–editor COI.

Table 1: Potential COIs for editors (and reviewers) as stipulated by Frontiers (Frontiers, 2024).

Potential COIs: editors and reviewers	
Family	Are any of the authors a spouse or significant other, a member of the same family, or a very close personal friend? Review editors should also not be a member of the same family as the handling editor.
Collaborations	Are you currently hosting or have hosted a Frontiers Research Topic with any of the authors within the past 2 years? Are you currently collaborating or have you collaborated on a research project or a publication with any of the authors within the past 2 years? Are you currently collaborating or have you collaborated with any of the authors as an advisor or in any other direct supervisory capacity in the past 5 years? Are you currently collaborating or have you collaborated with any of the authors as a student or in any other direct subordinate capacity in the past 5 years? Note: Review editors should not accept assignments if they have a close professional relationship with the handling editor, which in their view could affect the objectivity of the review.
Affiliation	Are you affiliated with the same institution as any of the authors? If so, has this resulted in interactions, collaborations, or mutual interests with the authors that would compromise your impartiality in conducting this review? Are you a current member of a committee or department that coincides with an affiliation with any of the authors?
Financial	Do you have a business or professional partnership with any author? Do you have financial interests or business relations with any organization involved in this research or in the preparation of the manuscript? Do you have any financial interest or competing interests in the content of the manuscript that might affect your ability to perform an objective review?

The True Nature of Editor–Author Conflicts of Interest

Most publishers assert that COIs between editors and authors should be avoided and/or disclosed (Table S1). The presence of such COIs does not necessarily indicate a bias in the peer-review and editorial processes for the published papers. In specialized subjects, where the pool of potential editors may be limited, it can be challenging to entirely avoid these links. Ideally, editors could still be able to perform their duties with professionalism and neutrality. Nonetheless, editor–author COIs should be rare and properly disclosed when they do occur. Especially editing one’s own manuscript should be avoided as this inevitably leads to a lack of objectivity.

A critical note is that many journals implement multiple editorial steps. It is possible for journals to list the ‘final’ editor – often the editor-in-chief or the journal’s special-issue editor – who approved the manuscript’s acceptance rather than the actual handling editor.

In this paper, we try to emphasize the significance of these conflicts, the necessity for a more thorough examination by publishers and the need to mention the name of all the editors and their role on the paper. Furthermore, in the case of a retraction related to editorial (or review) COIs, the publisher should specify more accurately the

COIs present and the editors involved. Often retraction notices mention that the integrity of the peer-review process was undermined due to undisclosed COIs, but provide little specifics (Chia et al., 2021; Maniruzzaman et al., 2022; Saucier et al., 2017; Te et al., 2021), which can raise doubt about the true nature of the undisclosed COIs and who was involved. Currently, potential COIs involving editors are infrequently reported (Dal-Ré et al., 2019; Makarem et al., 2023), while it is argued that editors should declare any potential COIs (Teixeira da Silva et al., 2019).

Although some journals have begun listing editor names in published papers, others have discontinued this practice. With scientific publishing currently under intense scrutiny (Berggren & Karabag, 2019; Casassus, 2022; Frank et al., 2023; Larregue, 2022; Vasconez-Gonzalez et al., 2024) there is an urgent need for more transparency (Prager et al., 2019) and higher ethical standards to uphold the quality and perception of the scientific community (Grey et al., 2024; Jamieson et al., 2019). In addition to mentioning the name of the editor(s), journals could also include a search function to find papers based on the handling editor(s), further increasing the transparency. Many, but not all, researchers are aware of the problems faced in the world of scientific publishing. Paper mills, fake reviews, and other issues discussed above have all been the subjects of attention and discussion – leading to calls for higher standards, changes in the peer-review process and better approaches to change the errors in the scientific literature etc (Besançon et al., 2022, 2024; Bik, 2024; Dadkhah et al., 2017; Elmore & Weston, 2020; Hensel, 2021; Herndon, 2016; Horbach & Halffman, 2019; Khajuria & Agha, 2013); however, little to no attention has been given to the part editors play, aside from fortifying their roles as guardians of the scientific integrity, taking care of potential COIs of the authors and safeguarding the correctness of the published literature (Desai & Shortell, 2011; Ferris & Fletcher, 2010; Johnson, 1996; Marusic, 2010; Pan, 2020; Resnik & Elmore, 2016). Yet, editors are responsible for the acceptance of papers (Chung, 2019), a fact that highlights the importance for them to be unbiased. Furthermore, while questionable research practices are receiving increased attention and the retraction rate has increased substantially, it remains below 1% (Van Noorden, 2023), numerous studies present a far more alarming view (Berrío & Kalliokoski, 2024; Bik, 2024; Candal-Pedreira et al., 2024; Grey et al., 2024; Ioannidis, 2005; Vasconez-Gonzalez et al., 2024). Collectively, these observations indicate a compelling need for a more rigorous and thorough ‘review’ of not only the peer-review but also the editorial phases of published literature, and also a potential increased mistrust of science: a notion, however, challenged by some studies which highlight that trust in science is generally still high (Cologna et al., 2025; Eichengreen et al., 2021; Lupia et al., 2024; Rutjens et al., 2021; Trench, 2025). The responsibility for a better and more controlled editorial and review process usually falls to journals and editors, necessitating a more stringent approach, especially given that editors, as discussed, can also be involved in potential COIs, thereby undermining the objectivity of the published manuscript.

Conclusions

Editors play a central role in the editorial and review process, ultimately determining whether submitted manuscripts will be published. They are entrusted with upholding the integrity and quality of the published literature (Chung, 2019; Haivas et al., 2004; Inglis, 2019). Given that editors and journals often come under scrutiny during research

misconduct cases (Marušić & Marušić, 2006), distrust in an editor can extend to distrust in the journal and science in general. Therefore, it is essential that editors maintain a strict policy of avoiding any potential COI to ensure the highest level of ethical and scientific rigor in their decision-making.

Most publishers have established clear guidelines regarding potential COIs for editors handling manuscripts, typically referencing COPE (see Table S1). However, the actual implementation of these guidelines by journals remains uncertain, varying between publishers despite most adhering to COPE standards, and many journals do not mention the handling editor(s) for published papers or report whether there were any COIs (Cooper et al., 2006; Haivas et al., 2004; Teixeira da Silva et al., 2019). Whether this failure to adhere to publishers' guidelines stems from ignorance, negligence, the cumbersome nature of the process, or a deliberate choice by editors is a question this paper does not resolve. Nonetheless, the occurrence of these COIs raises serious concerns about their implications and consequences. A more rigorous application of guidelines is necessary, and editors must be more aware of their essential role in maintaining the scientific integrity of published literature. A first step could be the streamlining of the guidelines to establish a clear and consistent set of potential COIs, including editor–author COIs. Furthermore, more attention needs to be given to the role of editors in managing potential COIs. The recent case in which a former editor faced the retraction of 43 papers in one journal plus several more in other journals due to potential unethical editorial handling (see above) underscores the need for rigorous monitoring of editors. Publishers have a crucial responsibility in managing COIs between editors and authors. Ultimately, who will oversee the gatekeepers of the editorial process and ensure the scientific integrity of the entire process if editors cannot always be trusted? As Radun (2023) concluded: '[I]gnoring or downplaying the non financial COI of editors and peer-reviewers is indeed dangerous to the scholarly community' (Radun, 2023). While the debate regarding the ethical considerations involving editors or editors-in-chief publishing in their own journal has already received some attention, a similar call for more attention, greater transparency and accountability is urgently needed for editor–author conflicts in general. To foster greater transparency and consistency in addressing COIs regarding editor–author COIs within scholarly publishing, we recommend the following:

1. COPE and publishers should collaborate to establish unified guidelines regarding COIs involving editors–author links and potential consequences of not adhering to these guidelines. This would ensure a standardized approach across the publishing landscape and minimize ambiguity in the identification and management of such COIs.
2. Publishers should enhance transparency by requiring editors to disclose any potential COI, including editor–author COIs, in a statement appended to the published manuscript. This will provide readers with valuable context when evaluating the findings of the study.
3. All publishers and journals should clearly list the names of the handling editor(s) for each published manuscript. This will increase accountability and allow readers to understand the editorial process that led to the publication.
4. In case of retractions, a clear description of the COIs and the role of the editors should be provided in the retraction notice by the publisher to rule out any doubt about what happened and who was involved. A general statement that the editorial

or peer-review process was undermined by conflicts of interest is too vague and can cause doubt about who was involved and lead to reputational damage of the authors, editor(s) and or reviewer(s).

Supplementary Material: The following supporting information can be downloaded at: [link to the article](#), Table S1: Guidelines from different publishers and editorial organizations regarding the potential conflicts of interest between editor and authors. Adapted and updated from [Teixeira da Silva et al. \(2019\)](#). For a more comprehensive list we refer to the links provided below for each publisher. All were accessed between July and September 2024; Table S2: Thirty-three papers recently retracted for conflicts of interest between the editor and author(s).

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