

## Why We Don't Use Guest Editors: A Publisher's Perspective

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I recently came across a LinkedIn post from Matt Hodgkinson, DOAJ's Head of Editorial, about Fengkai Group, a Hong Kong-based communications company. Apparently, they are offering *paid positions* as guest editors for special issues in journals indexed in SCI and Ei Compendex. If you're familiar with publication ethics, DOAJ or the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), this raises an immediate concern. BHTY is a member of DOAJ, and both BHTY and its sister journal, THMT, are members of COPE.

If you're not familiar with these organisations, guest editors are allowed in DOAJ-indexed journals, but their criteria limit contributions to special issues and require independent peer review of special issue contributions and oversight by the Editor-in-Chief. The COPE published guidance on guest-edited collections last year, which highlights "Journals should carefully manage guest-edited collections, taking into consideration the potential for unethical behaviors, such as citation cartels, inappropriate commissioning practices, and peer review fraud."

A special issue is a collection of themed articles focusing on a topic. It's a way to spotlight emerging topics and leading voices under a focused theme. Guest editors are invited or self-nominate as topic experts who shape the theme, inviting submissions, overseeing peer review and recommending which papers get published in the theme or special issue.

As a publisher, it's important to me to maintain transparency, quality control, ethical practices and communication with editors. Journals that allow unvetted guest editors or pay-for-play schemes don't meet these principles. I've shared examples of this with our journal editors in the past, and I keep them updated on unethical practices in the industry.

Integrity can be undermined in ways journal editors and publishers need to understand—especially those journals that want to be indexed in DOAJ. If a publisher is applying for or wants to maintain indexing, I believe editorial policies must show a commitment to integrity and change as market needs present. This protects readers, authors and the reputations of both the journal and editorial board members.

### What's Happening with Guest Editors?

At *BHTY*, the EiCs and I were flooded with random special issue proposals after we announced two new EiCs for the journal across social media platforms. In reviewing them, we found weak credentials, little-to-no experience in the field and CVs (résumés) filled with scientific event advisory board participation or competition judging, rather than peer-reviewed publications. We checked Google Scholar profiles: most had no recent published articles relevant to our editorial mission either.

Of the 12 proposals we received for special issues, only two were approved—and these received zero submissions. We spent a lot of time reviewing proposals and emailing with zero return on investment.

This left us feeling that guest editor positions have become a common way to pad CVs without doing real work. The editors-in-chief (EiCs) and I decided this undermines the credibility of scholarly publishing. Now, we only allow *lead* editors who are already members of our editorial team. Editors are onboarded and must follow all policies and procedures. There are no "guest editors." Now, we have LEAD editors.

We've noticed proposal submissions are down, and those that we point to the new policy have not followed up either. We still welcome proposals for special issues, as this can be a great way to amplify groundbreaking themes, elevate worldwide exposure and generate revenue. However, we remain committed to upholding quality and integrity and to better use of our time.

### Real-World Impact

Guest editors typically serve as a temporary expert lead for a special issue, while the journal's regular editors manage the entire publication. When proposals for special issues and suggested "guest editors" are presented, issues that ensue might include:

- *Time Wasted:* EiCs spend hours reviewing proposals and managing emails that go nowhere.
- *Favouritism and Conflicts of Interest:* Guest editors might accept low-quality papers from colleagues or promote their own work.

- *Credibility Damage:* These practices erode trust in peer review and the journal's reputation—gossip will certainly follow.
- *Researcher Exploitation:* Early-career researchers from emerging nations are particularly vulnerable.

### Setting Higher Standards

As a publisher, I'm concerned about the real-world impact of how the role of the guest editor is being exploited. We've experienced how it can affect a journal firsthand. Below are practical steps we took for BHTY and THMT. They're found on each journal's theme and special issue tab. We send this link to those submitting a query or proposal with clear instructions.

- *Require Editorial Board Membership:* Only existing board members can lead special or theme issues. If someone has genuine expertise, we invite them to join the board first. All journal and peer review policies must be followed. Onboarding also emphasises this. A good resource to reference would be COPE's guidance on editorial board participation.
- *Transparent Processes:* Create a detailed page listing requirements for special issues, conference proceedings, supplements and advertising. Direct all queries there.
- *Proper Oversight:* Ensure experienced board members supervise newer editors, especially those early in their careers. Take the time to answer their questions and provide tools, videos, etc., to help them learn and gain positive experiences that improve productivity, success and teamwork.
- *Separate Review Processes:* For conference proceedings, we require full peer review by different reviewers than those on the conference committee. Articles must meet the same standards as regular submissions. In effect, they are re-reviewed and are either accepted or rejected.
- *Welcome Diverse Voices Responsibly:* Supporting early career academics is important but keep standards high.

### Why This Matters

Scholarly publishing faces enough challenges without undermining ourselves through poor quality control and outright greed. We all know reviewers are overcommitted, and there is pressure to publish more content, but the solution isn't to

lower standards—it is to build stronger, more sustainable editorial processes and guidance.

### Change Is Good

I encourage others to examine their journal policies and practices to ensure rigorous standards and integrity when it comes to special issues and editors. It is up to each of us to protect publication ethics and research integrity and serve genuine scholarly communication to raise the market's expectations and trust.

Not every journal will take the same approach—and that's okay. Proactive publishers marking a clear, principled stance are what the industry needs. Deliberate actions will ultimately strengthen and lift the entire ecosystem.

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