

Recommendations on "Grey-Zone Publishers"

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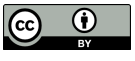
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Commission d'Evaluation

Recommendations on "Grey-Zone Publishers"*

Prepared by the working group composed of the
following Inria Evaluation Committee members:
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In recent years, several publishers, notably MDPI and Frontiers, have significantly increased their presence in the fields of computer science and mathematics, areas where they were absent in the past. Their presence raises a number of questions, often troubling evaluators and jury members.[1]

Without deciding on these questions, it is important to emphasize that the editorial processes of these publishers are significantly different from those usually implemented in the fields of computer science and mathematics. In particular, they are distinguished by:

- Extremely short review and publication times, as emphasized by the publishers themselves. For example, reviewers have 7 days at Frontiers[2], between 7 and 10 days at MDPI (and 3 days in the case of a report for a revised version)[3]. The median time from submission to publication at MDPI in 2021, for all journals combined, is 38 days.[4]
- A very high proportion of articles published in "special issues", managed by external editors. For example, according to the journal's website, "Sensors" (MDPI) had 806 "special issues" with a submission date in 2022, (i.e., more than 2 per day of the year), and 1903 new special issues are currently open for submission.
- Automated search for reviewers by non-public algorithms: while it is generally possible for an editor to deactivate this option and select reviewers in the traditional way, reviewers are systematically selected by an algorithm as soon as the editor exceeds a very short deadline.[5]

*Translation of the following document `https://hal.inria.fr/hal-04001505` by G. Pallez.

[1] See for instance: « Alertes sur les éditeurs douteux » de l'Office français de l'intégrité scientifique (Hcérès) `https://www.hceres.fr/fr/infolettre-de-lofis-ndeg-3` ;
« Mdpi, produire en masse les articles avec un délai soumis-accepté de quatre semaines », C. Fovet-Rabot, Cirad, `https://agritrop.cirad.fr/601218/` ;
« Combatting Predatory Academic Journals and Conferences», The InterAcademy Partnership `https://www.interacademies.org/publication/predatory-practices-report-English` ;
« Is MDPI a predatory publisher? », P. Crosetto `https://paolocrosetto.wordpress.com/2021/04/12/is-mdpi-a-predatory-publisher/`.

[2] `https://www.frontiersin.org/about/peer-review`

[3] `https://www.mdpi.com/editorial_process`

[4] `https://www.mdpi.com/about/annual-reports`

[5] `https://www.frontiersin.org/about/how-we-publish`

- Acceptance criteria are sometimes unusual: according to editor testimonies gathered by the Inria Evaluation Committee, in some of these journals, an article is accepted as soon as two reviewers support it, regardless of the number of negative reports, unless there is strong opposition from the associate editor.[6] Some MDPI journals practice "open review", but only by choice of the authors.[7] At Frontiers, the names of the reviewers who gave a favorable opinion are public, but not those who recommended rejection.[8]
- An extremely large number of editors (Frontiers in Neuroscience has 12,253 editors) and often various categories of editor (Field Chief Editor, Specialty Chief Editor, Associate Editor, Review Editor).
- The use of names very similar to existing journals, such as Cells (MDPI) and Cell (CellPress).

These differences with the practices of most other journals in mathematics and computer science are sufficiently important that publications and editorial assignments at these publishers should be considered with particular attention during evaluations.

1 Recommendations for jury members

1.1 On publications

The Inria Evaluation Committee encourages jury members and evaluators to be extremely vigilant about the quality of articles published by these publishers, and to always read and check the content of these articles. In general, and irrespective of the publication medium, jury members are encouraged to base their assessment on the content of published articles, and in particular to read the articles put forward by applicants.

The Inria Evaluation Committee also encourages juries to take into account in their evaluation the publication policy of candidates or teams, the relevance of the chosen journals or conferences, and the emphasis placed on transparency and reproducibility of results.

1.2 On editorial jobs

Given the automation of certain editorial tasks (choice of referees, correspondence, etc.), and the size of editorial committees in some journals or conferences, editorial tasks can cover a wide range of workloads and roles within a scientific community. For this reason, the Inria Evaluation Committee recommends that juries verify the scope of candidates' editorial duties, and assess them qualitatively.

2 General recommendations for members of Inria project-teams

The Evaluation Committee strongly urges experienced researchers and thesis advisors to guide early-career researchers in their teams to select relevant journals and conferences for their contributions, to follow a consistent publication policy that gives importance to transparency and reproducibility, and that favors journals and conferences known for their exemplary scientific practices.

[6] At Frontiers, if the Associate Editor wishes to reject a paper, the recommendation is made to the Specialty Editor, who takes the decision (whereas the Associate Editor can accept a paper on their own). Source: Review Editor guidelines (section 2.6.1 et 2.6.2), Frontiers, February 15.

[7] `https://www.mdpi.com/about/announcements/1405`

[8] `https://www.frontiersin.org/about/peer-review`

It also recommends that researchers find out about the editorial practices of a journal or conference before agreeing to serve on its editorial board or as guest editor of a "special issue". In particular, it advises colleagues to terminate their involvement as soon as they witness a practice they consider contrary to the scientific requirements of their discipline, and to report any such practice to the "Direction de la culture et de l'information scientifiques d'Inria".

3 General recommendations for applicants to a promotion or a recruitment competition

The Inria Evaluation Committee requires applicants and project teams to describe their publication strategy in a few sentences. These sentences can explain the choice of publication venue (general or specialized conferences, conferences or journals, etc.), and can provide explanations in the event of publication in a journal or conference whose quality might be deemed questionable, as defined on pages 8-9 of `https://www.interacademies.org/publication/predatory-practices-summary-French`.

In the case of editorial activity, the Inria Evaluation Committee requires applicants to explain their exact editorial role (associate editor, review editor, etc.), its place in the editorial process, the number of editors or the size of the program committee, and to describe the corresponding amount of work.