Is editing an IJERPH special issue a way to self publish?

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### IJERPH - mega journal

The [International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health](https://www.mdpi.com/journal/ijerph) has grown rapidly in recent years. It now publishes so many papers [it is classed a mega journal](https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/article-abstract/2802853). Concerns have been raised about MDPI, IJERPH’s publisher, [with debate about whether it is a predatory journal or not or something in-between](https://paolocrosetto.wordpress.com/2021/04/12/is-mdpi-a-predatory-publisher/).

### Trouble at mill

Recently, [Clarivate delisted IJERPH so it no longer has an “official” impact factor](https://www.science.org/content/article/fast-growing-open-access-journals-stripped-coveted-impact-factors). This is a big blow as researchers are often judged on the impact factor of the journal they publish in. So the higher the impact factor the better. For a mega journal in public health, IJERPH’s impact factor was impressive, although there is evidence that this was due to [impact factor inflation](https://mahansonresearch.weebly.com/blog/mdpi-mega-journal-delisted-by-clarivate-web-of-science).

### Nothing special

Publishing papers in special issues seems key to [MDPI’s and IJERPH’s growth](https://paolocrosetto.wordpress.com/2021/04/12/is-mdpi-a-predatory-publisher/). There is really nothing special about special issues in IJERPH as the majority of IJERPH’s papers in 2022 were in special issues. One aspect yet (I think) to be explored is special issue’s use as a vehicle for self publication. A special issue is edited by the people who proposed its topic rather than the normal editors (although they may have input). It is not uncommon for IJEPHR editors to also author a paper in a special issue.

library(tidyverse)

## ── Attaching core tidyverse packages ──────────────────────── tidyverse 2.0.0 ──  
## ✔ dplyr 1.1.2 ✔ readr 2.1.4  
## ✔ forcats 1.0.0 ✔ stringr 1.5.0  
## ✔ ggplot2 3.4.2 ✔ tibble 3.2.1  
## ✔ lubridate 1.9.2 ✔ tidyr 1.3.0  
## ✔ purrr 1.0.1   
## ── Conflicts ────────────────────────────────────────── tidyverse\_conflicts() ──  
## ✖ dplyr::filter() masks stats::filter()  
## ✖ dplyr::lag() masks stats::lag()  
## ℹ Use the conflicted package (<http://conflicted.r-lib.org/>) to force all conflicts to become errors

# load file of editor / author connections  
  
ijerph\_special\_03\_02\_df <- read\_rds("https://github.com/frankpopham/ijerph/blob/master/data/ijerph\_special\_03\_02\_df.RDS?raw=true")  
  
ijerph\_special\_03\_02\_papers <- read\_rds("https://github.com/frankpopham/ijerph/blob/master/data/ijerph\_special\_03\_02\_papers.RDS?raw=true")  
  
#variable for paper type  
ijerph\_special\_03\_02\_papers <- ijerph\_special\_03\_02\_papers %>%  
 unnest\_wider(pubtype, names\_sep="\_")   
   
ijerph\_special\_03\_02\_papers %>%  
 count(pubtype\_1, pubtype\_2, pubtype\_3)

## # A tibble: 24 × 4  
## pubtype\_1 pubtype\_2 pubtype\_3 n  
## <chr> <chr> <chr> <int>  
## 1 Clinical Trial Journal Article <NA> 17  
## 2 Editorial Comment <NA> 2  
## 3 Editorial Randomized Controlled Trial <NA> 1  
## 4 Editorial Review <NA> 1  
## 5 Editorial <NA> <NA> 67  
## 6 Historical Article Journal Article <NA> 1  
## 7 Journal Article Comment <NA> 8  
## 8 Journal Article Meta-Analysis Review 108  
## 9 Journal Article Meta-Analysis <NA> 23  
## 10 Journal Article Multicenter Study Randomized Controlled T… 3  
## # ℹ 14 more rows

ijerph\_special\_03\_02\_papers <- ijerph\_special\_03\_02\_papers %>%  
 mutate(notpaper = case\_when(pubtype\_1=="Editorial" ~ 1,   
 pubtype\_1=="Published Erratum" ~ 1,  
 pubtype\_2=="Comment" ~ 1,  
 .default = 0))   
  
ijerph\_special\_03\_02\_df <- ijerph\_special\_03\_02\_df %>%  
 left\_join(select(ijerph\_special\_03\_02\_papers, paper\_doi, notpaper), by="paper\_doi")  
   
# editor an author on paper  
  
paper\_results <- ijerph\_special\_03\_02\_df %>%  
 filter(notpaper==0) %>%  
 group\_by(paper\_titles) %>%  
 summarise(seds=sum(editors), special\_page=first(special\_page)) %>%  
 mutate(ynedspaper = ifelse(seds==0, 0, 1)) %>%  
 group\_by(special\_page) %>%  
 summarise(npapers=n(), seds=sum(seds), synedspaper=sum(ynedspaper)) %>%  
 mutate(ynedsspecial = ifelse(seds==0, 0, 1)) %>%  
 mutate(avepaper=synedspaper/npapers) %>%  
 ungroup()  
  
paper\_results2 <- paper\_results %>%  
 summarise(special\_papers=sum(synedspaper), npapers=sum(npapers), special\_eds=sum(ynedsspecial), nspecial=n())

### Self publishing

Obviously it is well recognised that if an editor is an author on a submitted paper to their journal (or special issue) then the editor should not be involved in decisions relating to their paper. [MDPI’s guidelines are as follows:](https://www.mdpi.com/special_issues_guidelines)

**Editor’s Submission:** The special issue may publish contributions from the Guest Editor(s), but the number of such contributions should be limited, to ensure the diversity and inclusiveness of authorship representing the research area of the Special Issue. Any article submitted by a Guest Editor will be handled by a member of the Editorial Board.

I calculated that a fifth (20.1%) of all papers (excluding editorials, comments, erratum and retractions) in special issues in IJEPHR have an editor as an author with three quarters (73.5%) of special issues having at least one paper with an editor as an author . My calculations are based on analysis of all papers (11059) published in special issues (1271) that closed for submissions from the start of 2022 to the end of March 2023. I was able to link authors and editors in special issues through their [Sciprofile](https://sciprofiles.com/) profile (an author network site run by MDPI on which each author and editor seems to have their own page).

library(ggridges)  
library(panelr)

## Loading required package: lme4

## Loading required package: Matrix

##   
## Attaching package: 'Matrix'

## The following objects are masked from 'package:tidyr':  
##   
## expand, pack, unpack

##   
## Attaching package: 'panelr'

## The following object is masked from 'package:stats':  
##   
## filter

library(broom)

## Registered S3 methods overwritten by 'broom':  
## method from   
## tidy.glht jtools  
## tidy.summary.glht jtools

paperedpaper <- ijerph\_special\_03\_02\_df %>%  
 filter(notpaper==0) %>%  
 group\_by(paper\_titles) %>%  
 summarise(seds=sum(editors), paper\_doi=first(paper\_doi)) %>%  
 mutate(ynedspaper = ifelse(seds==0, 0, 1)) %>%  
 ungroup() %>%  
 select(paper\_doi, ynedspaper)  
  
  
ijerph\_special\_03\_02\_papers <- ijerph\_special\_03\_02\_papers %>%  
 filter(notpaper==0) %>%  
 left\_join(paperedpaper, by="paper\_doi") %>%  
 mutate(across(received:medline, ~ymd\_hm(.x))) %>%  
 mutate(rec\_to\_rev= as.period(received%--%revised, unit="day")) %>%  
 mutate(rec\_to\_rev=time\_length(rec\_to\_rev, unit="days")) %>%  
 mutate(rec\_to\_rev=ifelse(is.na(rec\_to\_rev), time\_length(as.period(received%--%accepted, unit="day"),  
 unit="days"), rec\_to\_rev)) %>%  
 mutate(edsasauth=ifelse(ynedspaper==0, "No editor as author", "Editor as author"))  
  
  
  
  
ijerph\_special\_03\_02\_papers %>%  
 group\_by(edsasauth) %>%  
 summarise(n(),  
 mean(rec\_to\_rev),  
 IQR(rec\_to\_rev),  
 median(rec\_to\_rev),  
 sd(rec\_to\_rev))

## # A tibble: 2 × 6  
## edsasauth `n()` `mean(rec\_to\_rev)` `IQR(rec\_to\_rev)` `median(rec\_to\_rev)`  
## <chr> <int> <dbl> <dbl> <dbl>  
## 1 Editor as aut… 2219 36.9 20 33  
## 2 No editor as … 8840 37.7 20 35  
## # ℹ 1 more variable: `sd(rec\_to\_rev)` <dbl>

test34 <- ggplot(ijerph\_special\_03\_02\_papers, aes(x = rec\_to\_rev, y=edsasauth)) +  
 geom\_density\_ridges(scale = 1.2) +  
 xlab("Received to revision in days") +  
 ylab("")  
  
  
  
crossmodel <- lm(rec\_to\_rev ~ ynedspaper, data=ijerph\_special\_03\_02\_papers)  
  
crossmodel\_ci <- tidy(crossmodel, conf.int = T)  
   
ijerph\_special\_03\_02\_papers <- ijerph\_special\_03\_02\_papers %>%  
 group\_by(special\_page) %>%  
 mutate(specialid = cur\_group\_id()) %>%  
 mutate(specialt = row\_number()) %>%  
 ungroup()  
  
paneldf <- panel\_data(ijerph\_special\_03\_02\_papers, id=specialid, wave=specialt)  
  
withinmodel <- wbm(rec\_to\_rev~ynedspaper, model="within", data=paneldf)

### How fast?

MDPI facilitates quick peer review. Prof Dorothy Bishop explored [Editor Response Time (RT)](https://psyarxiv.com/6mbgv) for some [Hindawi’s journals](https://www.hindawi.com/). She found that special issue papers were reviewed much faster. This inspired me to look at IJERPH and I found review times for 2022 for special issues and non special issue papers for this journal were similar (and similar to a Hindawi journal’s special issue). I extend the analysis here to compare special papers where the editor is an author or not. The average time from paper reception to paper revision was 37.7 days for papers where an editor was not an author and 36.9 days for where an editor was an author. That’s a difference of -0.86(95% CI, -1.69 to -0.03).