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Editorial Code of Practice

The Royal Astronomical Society serves the astronomical and geophysical communities in several ways, among them through publishing journals which present the results of scientific research. The editors of RAS journals are responsible for maintaining the Society's guidelines for reviewing and accepting papers submitted to the journals. Issues of duplicate publication (1) and plagiarism (2) in scientific journal papers can cause considerable conflict among members of research teams and embarrassment for both authors and editors. Accordingly, the RAS has produced the following set of guidelines for authors, referees and editors. In what follows the terms 'referee' and 'reviewer' are interchangeable.

This code of practice was last updated on 27 August 2021.

Guidelines

Correspondence and reports relating to journal submissions should be considered confidential by all parties -- editors, authors, and referees -- and should not be made publicly available without the express permission of the journal's Editor in Chief.

A. Obligations on Editors of Scientific Journals

1. While ensuring that manuscripts are processed promptly, the aim of an editor is to ensure that the published work will be as accurate, comprehensive, and scientifically valuable as possible. The editors of the RAS journals will give unbiased consideration to all manuscripts offered for publication, judging each on its merits.
2. The editor is guided by the evaluations of referees and may also consult other editors in the course of reaching a decision on the publication of a submitted paper. The editor has complete responsibility and authority to accept a submitted paper for publication, but a rejection must be confirmed by at least one other editor.
3. The editor and other editorial staff will not disclose any information about a manuscript under consideration to anyone other than reviewers and potential reviewers.
4. Where an author has chosen to post a paper submitted to a RAS journal to a publicly accessible web site or to present material from the paper in a public forum (e.g. at a conference) s/he may receive comments from third parties which they wish to reflect in the submitted manuscript. The editor will decide whether to allow such changes to be made or require the paper to be withdrawn and re-submitted.
5. Where in the circumstances outlined in paragraph 4 comments are directed to the Editorial Office Manager or editor they will decide to either a) act on them and if

appropriate share them with the relevant referee(s), or b) request the third party to contact the author(s) directly. Circumstances where the former course of action is more appropriate include comments from bona fide scholars which make serious charges of professional misdemeanour by the author(s). In investigating these charges the Editorial Office Manager or editor will decide whether to involve the author(s). Except where anonymity is essential to protect a complainant from unfair repercussions their identity and the nature of their charge will be divulged to the parties involved in the investigation.

6. Editorial responsibility and authority for any manuscript authored by an editor and submitted to the editor's journal will be delegated to some other qualified editor.
7. Editors should avoid situations of real or perceived conflicts of interest. Such conflicts may include, but are not limited to, handling papers from present and former students, from colleagues with whom the editor has recently collaborated, and from those in the same research group.
8. Where, subsequent to publication, errors are identified in a paper, the editor will facilitate publication of an erratum.

B. Obligations on Authors

1. An author's central obligation is to present a concise, accurate account of the research performed as well as an objective discussion of its significance.
2. A paper should contain sufficient detailed information and references to public sources of information to a) permit the author's peers to evaluate it comprehensively and b) enable the reader to reconstruct how the results were obtained.
3. An author, where appropriate following a literature search, should cite those publications that have been influential in determining the nature of the reported work and that will guide the reader quickly to the earlier work that is essential for understanding the present investigation. Citations should be limited to those whose results are used in the present work or to whom credit should be given for the ideas discussed. It is not appropriate to cite all articles in the field. Information obtained in the course of confidential services, such as refereeing manuscripts or grant applications, cannot be used without permission of the author of the work being used.
4. Fragmentation of research papers should be avoided. Authors who fragment their work into a series of papers must be able to justify doing so on the grounds that it enhances scientific communication.
5. It is unethical for an author to publish manuscripts describing essentially the same research in more than one journal of primary publication. Submitting the same manuscript to more than one journal concurrently is unethical and unacceptable.
6. An author may make changes to a paper after receiving referee's comments but should make no changes to a paper after it has been accepted. If there is a compelling reason to make changes, the author is obligated to inform the editor directly of the nature of the desired change. Only the editor has the final authority to approve any such requested changes.
7. A criticism of a published paper may be justified; however, in no case is personal criticism or abusive language considered acceptable. The RAS reserves the right to refuse publication to authors who resort to abusive or aggressive language in their communications with the journal or its referees.
8. Only persons who have contributed significantly to the research and approved its submission should be listed as authors.

9. Authors are obliged to conduct their research in an ethical and responsible manner.
10. Any author who believes that this Code of Practice has been breached may register a complaint, in writing, through the Editorial Office Manager and/or the Editor in Chief of the RAS journal concerned. If the complaint is not resolved satisfactorily it will be passed to the Executive Director of the Society together with all relevant correspondence. The Executive Director will investigate the complaint and will either dismiss it or conclude that a breach of this Code has taken place. In the latter case appropriate redress, e.g. an apology to the author or a change to editorial reviewing procedures, will be recommended to the Editorial Office Manager.

C. Obligations on Referees of Manuscripts

1. Any referee who feels inadequately qualified or lacks the time to judge the research reported in a manuscript should inform the editorial staff.
2. A referee should judge objectively the quality of the manuscript and respect the intellectual independence of the authors. In no case is personal criticism appropriate.
3. A referee should be sensitive even to the appearance of a conflict of interest when the manuscript under review is closely related to the reviewer's work, either published or in progress. If in doubt, s/he should return the manuscript promptly without review, advising the editor of the conflict of interest or bias.
4. A reviewer should not evaluate a manuscript authored or co-authored by a person with whom the reviewer has a personal or professional connection if the relationship would bias judgment of the manuscript.
5. A referee should treat a manuscript sent for review as a confidential document. It should neither be shown to nor discussed with others except, in special cases, to persons from whom specific advice may be sought; in that event, the identities of those consulted should be disclosed to the editor, and the identities of the authors should not be disclosed to those consulted.
6. If the author(s) post a pre-publication version of the submitted paper to a publicly accessible web site or present material from the paper in a public forum (such as a seminar or conference) and comments arise they may be taken into account by the reviewer as described in paragraphs A4 and A5 above.
7. Referees should explain and support their judgments adequately so that editors and authors may understand the basis of their comments. Any statement that an observation, derivation, or argument has been previously reported should be accompanied by the relevant citation.
8. A referee should be alert to failure of authors to cite relevant work by other scientists. A referee should call to the editor's attention any substantial similarity between the manuscript under consideration with any published paper or with any manuscript submitted concurrently to another journal.
9. Referees should refrain from suggesting that authors include citations to their (or an associate's) work merely to increase citation counts or to enhance the visibility of their (or their associate's) work.
10. Referees should not use or disclose unpublished information, arguments, or interpretations contained in a manuscript under consideration, except with the consent of the author.
11. The identity of the referee will not be disclosed to the author(s) unless s/he chooses so to do.

Notes

(1) Duplicate publication occurs when authors pass off, as original, research that has been published either substantially or in its entirety elsewhere. Duplicate papers have shared hypotheses, data, discussion points, or conclusions, but do not cross-reference the prior publication. Not only does duplicate publication constitute a possible copyright violation, it also deceives the scientific community as the extent of knowledge in a given field. While ultimately the decision to publish lies with the journal editor, the burden of responsibility for preventing duplication falls to the author(s). Authors should not submit identical or substantially similar work if it has already been published in another outlet. Examples of alternative outlets include book chapters and published conference proceedings of whole papers (as opposed to abstracts). The prior publication of any similar work (e.g. other papers based on the same data and methods, or using the same sample) should be clearly referenced in the manuscript. Authors should also inform the editor of any such work already existing, or about to be published. The editor must then decide whether the manuscript includes enough new information to warrant publication.

Authors should avoid 'cutting and pasting' (i.e. copying verbatim) substantial chunks of text from their own previously published work. Moderate duplication, involving no more than a few paragraphs throughout the paper, is acceptable provided that reference is made to the publication in which the material first appeared.

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Sources

1. Committee on Publications Ethics, 'Guidelines on Good Publication Practice'
2. British Psychological Society, 'Principles of Publishing'
3. American Geophysical Union, 'Guidelines to Publication of Geophysical Research'
4. American Chemical Society, 'Ethical Guidelines to Publication of Chemical Research'