

Issues related to papers submitted to “discussion” journals

Background

Authors in any subject area have always had a number of potential publications to choose from when they decide that they want to publish their research. As well as subscription journals to pick from, the increasing number of Open Access models has meant that the choices for authors are expanding all the time.

A new type of publication that has arisen from the OA movement is the European Geosciences Union (EGU) and Copernicus model of open peer review and Discussion journals, examples of which are:

Hydrology and Earth System Sciences: Discussions and *Hydrology and Earth System Sciences*

Earth Surface Dynamics: Discussions and *Earth Surface Dynamics*

How does this model work?

1. The author submits their paper to the Discussion section of the journal
2. Within 2–8 weeks, the paper is up online with a DOI, ready for the open peer review process
3. Two referees are invited to post their reviews online
4. Anyone else can comment on the paper whilst it is going through review
5. A decision is made on the paper based on the review comments, with the normal “major,” “minor,” “accept” and “reject” decisions available to the editors
6. If a paper receives a “minor” or “major” decision, the authors make their changes offline and submit their new version to the Discussion section for the next round of reviews
7. If a paper is accepted, it moves into the “proper” version of the journal, with a link to the original discussion version
8. If a paper is rejected, it remains online with the DOI and reviewer comments in the Discussion section of the journal

This discussion document concerns this model of peer review and publication, but primarily the consequences of the decision of “reject” on papers.

Papers rejected from the Discussion section of an EGU journal

On the website for these Discussion journals, the wording with regards to submission of rejected papers to other journals implies that they can use their rejected paper from the Discussion section and submit it elsewhere (please see below). However, we as publishers, along with a number of our editors have serious concerns about this, not least the fact that the Discussion journals’ publisher should not be dictating submission policies for other publications. The main reasons for concern are:

- Should editors agree to review a paper that is already “published”?
- Would this count as dual publication if the paper was accepted to another journal?

- There appears to be a low rejection rate for these types of journals, causing concern about the quality of research
- What will be the effect of open peer review on early career researchers? (pressures to publish more and more, bad reviews that remain online indefinitely etc.)
- What are the APC charges and when are they paid?

KEY QUESTIONS FOR THE FORUM:

What happens if a manuscript that has been published as a discussion paper in XXXD is not accepted for publication as a final paper in XXX? Can the manuscript be withdrawn from XXXD and published elsewhere?

Are there any issues with how papers with an earlier version published in XXXD are cited once the “definitive” paper is subsequently published?

As outlined on the journal homepage, discussion papers published in XXXD remain permanently archived, citable, and publicly accessible. Normally, they cannot be withdrawn after publication. This approach has been chosen for a number of practical and conceptual reasons, and it has proven to be beneficial for scientific communication and quality assurance as explained above and in more detail elsewhere.

Nevertheless, we are aware that the publication of a paper in XXXD and subsequent non-acceptance into XXX can be inconvenient for authors. In such cases, the authors have the following options to proceed:

- Option A

Appeal to the XXX executive committee for review and revision of the editorial decision. In this case, the executive committee will carefully review the decision of the co-editor who has originally handled the manuscript. This process will normally involve the original or additional referees and an iteration of manuscript review and revision. An appeal is recommended only if the authors are firmly convinced that the editorial decision not to accept the paper for XXX was clearly erroneous, and that their manuscript clearly meets all evaluation criteria for acceptance into XXX.

- Option B

Submission of rewritten manuscript for review, discussion, and publication in XXXD and XXX. If the editor and/or authors of a manuscript published and discussed in XXXD conclude that the manuscript can and should be re-written in a way which goes beyond regular revisions (e.g. addition of substantial new results, etc.), a rewritten manuscript can at any time be submitted for independent review, discussion, and publication in XXXD and XXX.

- Option C

Submission of the manuscript to an alternative journal. In many scientific journals pre-publication in a scientific discussion forum (like XXXD) is considered equivalent to pre-publication on a scientific pre-print server (like arXiv.org) and is not regarded as a reason for exclusion from (re-)submission for fully peer-reviewed publication. We expect that in the long run most if not all scientific journals will adopt this policy. Normally, even very good manuscripts can be further improved by revision. In the unlikely event that a very good manuscript cannot achieve publication in XXX, a revised and further improved version is very likely to achieve publication in an alternative journal.

The topic was discussed at the COPE Forum on 4 March 2014.

COMMENTS FROM THE FORUM (4 March 2014) – NOTE, Comments do not imply formal COPE advice, or consensus.

- Open peer review is a laudable goal, and discussion journals could be viewed as an extension to open peer review. The positive aspect to this process is that it increases transparency. However, are these discussion journals transparent about their policies and pricing? When are the article processing charges made, for example.
- The quality of the papers seems good. The system clearly has benefits for authors in getting their work published, but what are the risks?
- We tend not to see these types of discussion journals in the medical field but it is not dissimilar to pre-print versions of papers that do exist in many fields.
- Having a DOI number complicates this issue and is a significant factor. The process of assigning a DOI creates in effect a published paper.
- These discussion journals exist and we cannot modify them to suit our ideals but the emphasis must now be on how we respond to them in the most appropriate way. It is up to each journal to have their own policy and process to deal with these rejected papers if they are submitted to their journals. The policy should be made clear in the instructions to authors.
- If a journal has a policy not to accept these rejected papers, where does that leave the author? Where can they then take their paper? There is a broader issue if the publisher is not willing to take down rejected papers. Hence the policies of these discussion journals are affecting the future of some of these papers that may have a future by being published elsewhere. Thus it is the authors who are being punished.
- It raises the issue of what is publication and also the need for versioning. It is no longer the case that something is published and it is the definitive version. Maybe we should think about ways to link to earlier versions and forward to updated versions of papers?
- This is one of a number of open access models. We are increasingly seeing new models, so the question is, how should journals and publishers react?

In summary, the forum thought this was an interesting and complicated topic and would welcome guidance from COPE.

Action: COPE will convene a group from council and any interested members to draft an initial document to provide advice and guidance to editors and publishers on this issue.

COMMENTS POSTED ON THE WEBSITE

Posted by Charon Pierson, 18/2/2014

This seems to be an electronic version of a writing group - but the unintended consequences are of serious concern. Some disciplines have a history of online discussion papers, but the process of assigning a DOI creates what I consider to be a published paper. It would make more sense to me to have a non-public forum for these open reviews and discussions so that the authors could revise and submit officially to a journal. Open reviews on a non-public, non-discoverable site would allow academic discussion yet preserve the author's ability to publish a clean document, unencumbered by a DOI-D. Open peer review is a laudable goal, but this process as described seems extremely cumbersome.

Posted by Michael J Wise, 26/2/2014

With the model already being "out there", the issue is not what the Discussion journals will do, but how other journals react to that development. While ArXiv has been around for a long time, it was the sole example until recently, where we now have a range of repositories, formal and informal. Journals will need to be explicit about the sorts of venues they would consider as prior publication. If papers from conferences are okay, for example, how about the appearance of those papers in a repository? Two metrics may be coverage and value adding. If only a small percentage of the likely readership will have seen the work, e.g. at a conference, the wider publication will be warranted; more so if the earlier paper has been expanded or improved. On those metrics, a paper that has formerly been seen as a Discussion paper will have to be substantially different/improved to merit publication elsewhere, because most of those who may be interested in it will have seen it. Looks like career suicide to me, but that is really none of the concern of a journal editor.

Posted by Zoe Mullan, 28/2/2014

I tend to agree with Michael that, since these journals exist, we cannot really attempt to modify them to suit our ideals - merely respond to them in the most appropriate way with clearly stated policies in information for authors. For example a journal concerned about this might state "We regard the existence of any manuscript online in a public forum and with a DOI as published, and therefore we do not consider such manuscripts for publication. This policy would include those manuscripts described as items of discussion."

Posted by Charon Pierson, 1/3/2014

I do agree that the journal must set its own policies on this, however, if you look at the London School of Economics European Institute under working papers, you will see that these papers are numbered (not with a DOI), they are freely available, and they are citable as Discussion paper no. XXX. Subsequently published articles and books cite the discussion documents also. This is also fairly common in sociology as well as economics. The difference is that the hosting is on the university website and not the journal website. You can trace some of the discussion papers to various publications. There has been a system in place that seems to work for economics and sociology at least, so the questions asked by the author of the original posting are somewhat confusing. I think their issue is that they are hosting both the discussion and the final product so they don't want discussion papers hanging on in the discussion section that have not been published in their regular journal. For me the problem comes that they are assigning a DOI to a paper that is essentially in open review. Maybe we need clarification about the original posting.

Posted by Stephanie Harriman, 4/3/2014

The positive aspect to this process is that it increases transparency. Often manuscripts will be rejected from several journals before they are published. If a manuscript is rejected, concerns raised by editors and reviewers will not be visible to editors and reviewers of subsequent journals. This means that authors may choose to ignore and not address valid referee concerns. In the case of a “discussion” article, there is a clear record of the previous reviewers’ negative comments which future editors and reviewers can see. In some ways this could be viewed as an extension to open peer review, where the reviewers’ reports are available online in a pre-publication history for a published article; in this process comments would also be visible for rejected manuscripts. In order for this practice to increase transparency, it would be important that the authors declared on submission that the manuscript had been rejected from a “discussion” journal.