Developing Policies and Procedures Regarding Preprints

Posting to preprint servers has long been an accepted practice in fields such as physics (e.g., arXiv.org), but is relatively new to fields such as health sciences. Preprint servers allow authors to post their work on an online server, typically free to authors and readers, prior to, during, or instead of submission to a journal for peer review and consideration for publication. They allow authors to disseminate their work and receive feedback from their colleagues quickly, while still seeking peer review and journal publication for certification (see: https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2017/04/18/stars-aligning-preprints/). The COPE discussion document on preprints provides the background, challenges, and ethical questions for consideration regarding preprints and is a must-read.

The purpose of this resource is to provide editorial office professionals with a guide for developing policy and procedures for their journal(s) regarding preprints. No matter where your journal/society/publisher stands on the issue of preprints, you must be prepared to manage the issues that will arise, for preprints are evolving to reach all fields.

Establishing Policy

In drafting your journal’s policy regarding preprints, consider the following:

a. Will your journal allow submissions that have been posted as a preprint or not? Does your journal already have a policy about what constitutes prior publication? If so, does a preprint equal prior publication?

b. Start a discussion with your society and/or publisher and your editorial board regarding preprints. Share the pros and cons for your journal and keep the discussion active until a decision is made. Then write up a policy and post it in your author guidelines, in your submission system, and wherever else is appropriate.

c. Your policy can be as simple as, “Journal X does not consider submissions that have been published or posted before in any medium, including preprint servers.” Or “Journal X considers for publication submissions that have been or will be posted on preprint servers.” If your journal/publisher only considers submissions from certain preprint servers (e.g., not for profit), you will need to state this in your policy.

d. If your journal uses a double-blind peer review process, you will need to determine how considering submissions that are posted on preprint servers might jeopardize the authors’ anonymity and address this in your policy, perhaps with a statement warning authors that the double-blind process may
be compromised if they have posted their papers on a preprint server and they accept this if they submit to the journal.
e. If your policy is that you will consider submissions that are also posted as preprints, what will your policy be regarding the comments that might be posted on the preprint? Should the author revise the paper according to those comments along with the formal comments submitted by reviewers during your journal’s peer review process? If so, how should the author inform the editor and reviewers that comments posted on the preprint version have been addressed in the revision as well? Will you ask the reviewers to look at the submission’s preprint and consider any posted comments or will you ask them specifically not to do this?
f. Lastly, in regard to policy, who owns the copyright? Has the author already signed some type of a license in order to post the work on the preprint server? How should the author inform you of the existence and requirements of this existing license? How would this license work with the license the author needs to sign to submit and/or publish in your journal?

Creating your policies regarding preprints may take some time and discussions with a number of stakeholders – this is not something you can do on the fly after receiving your first submission that has been posted as a preprint or after discovering that a paper under review at your journal has recently been posted on a preprint server.

Once you are able to answer all of the questions above, and others you will think of that are specific to your journal, you will need to educate your editors, authors, and reviewers about how a submission to your journal that has been posted on a preprint server affects their role in the peer review process. This education can occur through the author guidelines, in a dedicated section on your journal website, in your peer review email templates, during editorial board meetings, at the annual meeting, etc.

Establishing Procedures

After developing your journal’s policy, you need to develop a workflow for how you will handle submissions that have been posted on a preprint server (even if your journal does not accept these submissions). For example:

a. Will you add a submission question about whether the work has been posted on a preprint server? If so, will you also add a question about what license the author may have signed in the process of posting the paper?
b. Will you add a check during the manuscript check-in process to identify whether a paper has been posted? Will you perform an online search to see if there is a preprint for that work?
c. Whether you allow submissions that are posted as preprints or not, will you start checking your submissions’ citations and reference lists to see if a preprint has been cited? Will the citation of preprints be allowed in submitted papers? If so, what will the required format for the citation be? Will you note in your citation/reference list that this is a preprint and/or that
it has not been peer reviewed so that information is clear to readers? Will you require the preprint’s DOI (if it has one) be listed in the reference list? If the preprint paper is accepted and published in a journal while the paper submitted to your journal is under peer review, will you require the authors to update the reference to the journal article? (This information should be added to your author guidelines.)

d. If you accept submissions that are posted as preprints, is this allowed for all article types or only certain types? (This information should be added to your author guidelines.)

e. How will you address overlap with posted preprints in the CrossCheck reports? Will you use the option to exclude the preprint server(s) URL(s) in iThenticate so that preprints of the articles are not included in the CrossCheck reports? (Note. If you do this, you will not be able to see if an author used text from another author’s preprint inappropriately.) What advice will you give to your editors in regard to preprint material appearing in CrossCheck reports?

f. How will you change your instructions to your reviewers regarding preprints? Should they or should they not consider any comments posted on the preprint versions when performing their own reviews? If your journal uses a double-blind peer review process, should they alert the editorial office if they have seen the preprints of papers they have been asked to review?

g. If you allow submissions that are posted as preprints, how will your post-acceptance workflow be affected?
   i. Will these papers be eligible for press releases? If so, how will you embargo the published paper when the content has already been posted?
   ii. How will the link between the published article and preprint be established and who will do this? What will the version of record be? Is there anything you need to do to ensure future authors cite the published article instead of the preprint? Both will have unique DOIs. (See CrossRef’s information on Posted Content.)

Preprints either are or will become a factor for your journal. Be prepared with written policies and workflows to manage this aspect of the peer review process.