

Pandemic publishing: rethinking editorial ethics during COVID

*Researchers need to observe ethical standards during a pandemic, say **Ben Kasstan (University of Bristol)**, **Rishita Nandagiri (LSE)** and **Siyane Aniley (Addis Ababa University)**, and journals should hold them to these standards.*

The pandemic has changed academic research. It has led to [gender gaps in authorship](#), questions about the [quality of scientific publishing](#), and [shifts in peer review processes](#). As the effects — short and long term — of the pandemic continue, more research will be produced under pandemic-shaped conditions and submitted for publication.

Himani Bhakuni and Seye Abimbola argue that authorship, research partnerships, and editorial practices in global health — the bread and butter of academic research, writing, and publishing — are [‘peppered with epistemic wrongs that lead to or exacerbate epistemic injustice’](#). These epistemic injustices play out in a number of ways, including credibility deficit, questionable research practices, and editorial racism. Ethical shortfalls in the increasingly marketised academic publishing industry are not new, but risk being compounded by the pandemic.

Much has been written about the [ethics of research in pandemic conditions](#), potential [principles underpinning resumption of in-person research](#), [concerns about inaccuracies in publications](#), and [methodological considerations for researchers](#). Less attention has been paid to the role of editors or editorial collectives within the context of pandemic research and knowledge production. The pandemic has exacerbated already entrenched and unethical practices, including differential power dynamics around authorship and ‘partnerships.’ Editors of [high profile journals have retracted papers published during COVID, highlighting issues around the veracity](#) of data and [ethical violations](#) in the biological and clinical sciences. We direct our attention to social science research that draws on fieldwork data, often conducted in different communities or countries.

We understand publication in academic journals as a site where epistemic wrongs can be tacitly approved, reproducing credibility deficits and the structural exclusion of made-marginalised knowledge producers and recipients. We were struck by an academic blog’s publication of an early career scholar’s fieldwork reflections that included photographs reflecting poor adherence to public health protective measures, including social distancing or the use of personal protective equipment (PPE), like a mask. [When asked about the ethical implications of conducting in person research during the pandemic, the editors removed the post while discussing the concerns raised with the author](#). This pushed us to ask: What are the ethical responsibilities of editors and editorial collectives in approving and publishing such research? We offer suggestions that might fall under a broader rubric of ‘pandemic ethics.’



The History Reading Room, Old Library, LSE in 1964. Photo: [LSE Library](#). No known copyright restrictions

Academic publishing constitutes a vital safeguard to ensure that knowledge is produced ethically and in morally just ways amidst pandemic conditions. We call on editorial collectives to discuss pandemic ethics and their role in the processing of manuscripts, and we call on Editorial Board members to hold journals to account on what pandemic ethics should involve. The recommendations are intended to support journals that receive manuscripts based on in-person field research — especially in the fields of global health, development, and anthropology — but may raise implications for editorial boards more broadly as they work to address the injustices within knowledge production.

Developing a journal section on pandemic ethics

Journal websites should display a 'pandemic ethics' section that outlines expectations and requirements for submitting authors to uphold. This may include detailing precautionary measures (e.g., guidance on lockdown, rapid testing protocols) that are specific to the pandemic in order to safeguard participants, researchers and collaborating stakeholders, or brief explanations of the pandemic conditions assessed prior to in-person data collection (e.g., social distancing). This is applicable to both in-person and remote research, when working with colleagues in-country to collect data.

Submitting authors should be informed of what pandemic ethics involves, particular to the journal and its focus.

This can involve a requirement for authors to detail what (if any) pandemic control measures were imposed in the jurisdiction of study at the time of in-person research, and how this was accounted for in their research design. Rather than only stating whether Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained, authors should note when IRB approval was granted for in-person research, and if any additional approvals were sought to reflect changing pandemic conditions in the country of research.

The 'letter to the editor' or submission checklist could be a practical space for authors to respond to these expectations and requirements. In the interests of transparency, journals could provide additional space for authors to expand on ethical protocols that are published alongside the article, as in the case of funding information.

Managing manuscript submissions on pandemic research

Editorial collectives should triage pandemic-related manuscripts that received IRB approval for in-person research before the pandemic and onset of public health restrictions imposed in the jurisdiction of study. If details provided are insufficient, editorial collectives should then request further information from the corresponding author about how in-person research was conducted during the pandemic and what protective measures (for research teams including authors, data collectors, and participants).

Manuscripts should not be submitted for peer review until there is further clarity on ethical practices and protective measures. Any published research found to contravene public health control measures and legal restrictions, or statements of pandemic ethics required by journals, should be reviewed by Editorial Board members with a view to request additional explanation or a response from authors that should be published alongside the manuscript, or, where justified, a retraction.

Editorial collectives should ask why in-person research was perceived to be necessary during public health restrictions. The reality of vaccine inequity between jurisdictions and variation in vaccination coverage levels means that the vaccination status of the researcher is not a sufficient precaution. As the pandemic has entered various waves and the likelihood of viral mutations remains a risk, corresponding authors should consider outlining why methods consisted of in-person research, including via locally-based data collectors, rather than virtual or remote methods (including telephone).

Many researchers have been conducting online or digital research due to the pandemic. The ethics of online research have been extensively debated by academic organisations, with some being explicit that '[making a document available online does NOT automatically give a researcher carte blanche to use it as research data](#)'. We suggest that editors be mindful that online research can still require IRB approval.

Ethics of in-person research

When researchers from the Global North have faced travel restrictions, they have often worked remotely, relying on researchers from the South to collect data and conduct field work. If fieldwork is conducted without PPE, for both the researcher and participant, then safety may be compromised.

The decision of governments to remove pandemic control measures (prior to the emergence of Omicron and since) does not necessarily mean in-person research can be considered ethical. Whether or not legal limitations on physical contact and movement were in place, corresponding authors should be expected to detail who conducted in-person research and explain the protective measures taken to protect researchers and participants. This could include explaining the extent to which participants and locally based researchers were involved in setting protocols or agreeing on measures. There should also be a clear explanation of how in-person research was conducted in accordance with any pandemic control measures and legally permitted activities.

We suggest editorial boards require transparency on how the study is conducted with regards to the pandemic safety of data collectors, field researchers and participants. Additionally, transparency around authorship and the roles of data collectors and field researchers in writing and producing the manuscript (and opportunities to participate in analyses and writing) should be requested. This links to the broader set of questions and concerns raised around [authorship](#) and [‘the foreign gaze’](#) in social science research.

Lastly, we are conscious that the pressure and burden of publishing is gendered and racialised, and this particularly affects early career and precariously employed researchers in and from the Global South and the Global North. Editorial collectives can support them to meet ethical requirements by offering transparent expectations, and also involving them in consultations on pandemic ethics so that journals can fully understand the challenges being faced and how to address them collaboratively.

To sum up, editorial collectives and boards have a responsibility to hold academics to account for research practices, and play an important role in signalling and modelling ethical standards that seek to redress some of the epistemic wrongs of knowledge production within its pages. The urgency to produce knowledge as the pandemic unfolds should not come at the expense of editorial scrutiny of manuscripts. We hope the suggestions outlined above can be a starting point to discuss what shape editorial ethics should take in the production of knowledge in these pandemic times, seeking to avoid reproducing epistemic injustices.

All authors contributed equally to the development of ideas and call for action in this post.

This post represents the views of the authors and not those of the COVID-19 blog, nor LSE.