

## EDITORIAL PROCESSES


## Case Study

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## Manuscript management systems require sensible management: The case of authors from different geographic regions

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**Abstract.** Manuscript management systems (MMSs) are used to facilitate the submission of articles to journals. They guide authors by making specific requests, which may be optional or mandatory. In the latter case, authors would hope that such requests are not trivial, nor – in the author’s opinion – should they be required for any aspects that are not related to the article’s academic content. In this case study, a brief account is noted for a mandatory clause in some MMSs of indexed journals in which the submitting author, and presumably the corresponding author (CA), must make note of the regional or geographic source of that work, research or intellect. In the case of a single CA with one affiliation, the choice is simple, and there are no issues, but when there is a single CA or co-CAs with multiple and geographically diverse affiliations, which regional source should be selected? This article emphasizes that in the latter case, metadata that is provided by the submitting author is both inaccurate and potentially biased. This is important if the journal and publisher use such metadata to showcase the regional or global diversity of their submitting authors. An assessment of the MMSs of 16 of the top 50 ranked neuroscience journals – in terms of their Clarivate impact factors – revealed only one journal (Elsevier’s *Brain Behavior and Immunity*) that required this mandatory “Region of Origin” clause in its MMS.


**Keywords:** accountability, cultural diversity, editorial and submission managers, manuscript handling, online submissions, transparency

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## Обоснованность требований в системах электронной редакции: кейс-исследование на примере авторов из разных регионов мира

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**Резюме.** Системы электронной редакции (*manuscript management systems, MMS*) используются для облегчения процедуры подачи статей в журналы. Они проводят авторов через эту процедуру с помощью перечня вопросов, часть из которых носит опциональный характер, а часть является обязательной. Обязательные вопросы, по мнению автора данного исследования, не должны касаться несущественных моментов и выходить за рамки научного содержания статьи. В работе кратко рассматривается практика включения в систему электронной редакции индексируемых журналов обязательного вопроса, в котором автор, подающий рукопись (то есть ответственный автор), должен указать региональную или географическую принадлежность выполненной работы, исследования или интеллектуального вклада. Если у единственного ответственного автора одна аффилиация, выбор очевиден и проблем не возникает. Но какой следует указать регион, когда у ответственного автора или нескольких ответственных соавторов аффилиации множественные и географически разнесенные?

В статье показано, что в таких случаях метаданные, вводимые при подаче рукописи, оказываются неточными и потенциально предвзятыми, и это особенно важно, если на их основе журнал демонстрирует широту географического охвата авторского состава. Анализ систем электронной редакции 16 из 50 ведущих журналов по нейронаукам (на основе импакт-фактора Clarivate) выявил лишь один журнал (*Brain, Behavior, and Immunity*, издательство Elsevier), в системе которого предусмотрен обязательный пункт *Region of Origin* («Регион принадлежности»).

**Ключевые слова:** ответственность, культурное разнообразие, редакционные системы подачи рукописей, обработка рукописи, онлайн-подача рукописей, прозрачность

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## INTRODUCTION

### The centrality of manuscript management systems in academic publishing

There is interest in assessing the integrity of manuscript management systems (MMSs), in terms of their content, structure and functionality. This is because, nowadays, the submission of an article to a journal is mostly effected via an MMS, which editors employ to manage submissions to their journal [1]. There are a number of MMSs available to journals and publisher, each with strengths and weaknesses [2]. Even though the submission steps on an MMS are automated and driven by artificial intelligence [3; 4], the content and sequence of requests for information from authors is determined by humans, presumably the journal's editors, or other technical staff managed by the publisher. Information that is requested includes optional and mandatory requests such as files, metadata related to the submitted article and its authors, and ethical declarations, to name a few. Some have suggested six core functions that editors should seek to satisfy when selecting an MMS: “automating manuscript tracking; selecting peer reviewers; assigning alternative reviewers; sending automated letters and reminders; facilitating blinded peer review, and monitoring and evaluating journal processes” [5, p. 55]. Even though MMSs have become central tools in the automated academic publication process, several unnecessary requirements during the submission of a manuscript may complicate the process itself, and be burdensome for authors [6]. As part of a wider appreciation of the impacts of MMSs on authors' submission experience, this paper takes a look at one aspect of the submission process that

is – in the author's opinion – redundant, because it has absolutely nothing to do with the academic value of a manuscript.

### Eagle-eyed scrutiny of manuscript management systems is necessary

Consequently, for the reasons outlined in the previous section, there is value in appreciating and recording weaknesses, flaws or mismanagement of MMSs, as these may negatively impact authors' submission experience, and in the case of requests that are redundant or peripheral to an article's academic content or integrity, the process may be perceived as a time-wasteful process. As one example, it was recorded how, in over a dozen Elsevier journals, which now employ Aries Systems Corporation's Editorial Manager®, having transitioned from its in-house EVISE system in 2020 [7], a manuscript file – the most important part of a submission – was not explicitly stipulated as a mandatory requirement for submission, a glitch that was eventually corrected [8]. In that paper, MMSs were referred to as online submission systems, and they are also known as editorial and submission managers. Even so, had a peer-reviewed academic paper not been published on that issue, the scientific community would likely never have known about that imperfection in Elsevier journals' MMSs.

## CASE STUDY: PROFILING OF REGIONAL SOURCE IN MANUSCRIPT MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

### 1. Evaluation case 1

As part of an ongoing exercise to appreciate submission-related issues in MMSs, this article – a case study – queries the sensibility of a mandatory requirement by select journals' MMSs

that the author had personally encountered during the submission of articles to those journals, specifically the requirement of having to define the regional source of the submitted paper. This is a problematic issue only in two cases. In the first case, where there are multiple authors from

teams that originate from different geographic locations or regions around the world, and assuming that at least two authors are listed as equal contributors and co-corresponding authors (CAs), which region or country should be selected on the MMSs in Fig. 1, and based on what criteria?

**A**

Article Type Selection (checked) → Attach Files (checked) → **General Information** (active) → Review Preferences → Additional Information → Comments → Manuscript Data

Please provide the requested information.

Choose Region  
Africa  
Asia Pacific  
China  
Europe  
Middle East  
North America  
South America  
South-east Asia  
Asia Pacific

Insert Special Character

If Origin related to your submission from the drop-down menu below.

Next

**B**

Article Type Selection (checked) → Attach Files (checked) → **General Information** (active) → Additional Information → Comments → Manuscript Data

Please provide the requested information.

Region Of Origin

Select the Region of Origin related to your submission from the drop-down menu below.

Choose Region

Insert Special Character

Next

**C**

Article Type Selection (checked) → Attach Files (checked) → **General Information** (active) → Additional Information → Comments → Manuscript Data

Please provide the requested information.

Region Of Origin

Select the Region of Origin related to your submission from the drop-down menu below.

Required \*

Choose Region

Insert Special Character

Back Proceed

**Fig. 1.** Three examples of editorial managers for which indicating the “Region of Origin” is a mandatory request\* for completing the submission process. In these cases, there is ambiguity as to whether the request pertains to the authors, where the research was conducted, or the region where the manuscript was developed. (A) Elsevier’s Nurse Education Today requests a choice from very broad geographic regions; (B) Taylor & Francis’ Journal of Communication in Healthcare; (C) Wolters Kluwer’s Academic Medicine. The editorial manager in all cases is Editorial Manager® (Aries Systems Corporation). Dates of data collection (i.e., screenshot dates): 11 June 2023 (A), 20 December 2023 (B), and 15 October 2024 (C).

*Disclaimer:* A submission of this debate to Academic Medicine was met with a boilerplate-worded desk rejection, without any editorial feedback. Screenshots (Fair Use) trimmed to include only basic relevant information, so not all items in all drop-down menus are displayed. Editorial manager URLs: <https://www.editorialmanager.com/net/default2.aspx> (A), <https://www2.cloud.editorialmanager.com/cih/default2.aspx> (B), <https://www.editorialmanager.com/acadmed/default2.aspx> (C).

\* Even if the red asterisk is not indicated, moving to the next step is not possible, so this step is mandatory).

The second case involves single authors that have two or more affiliations, or transnational affiliations. However, this is not an issue for a single author with a single national, geographic or regional affiliation.

The journals corresponding to the MMSs in Fig. 1 offer no guidance or clarity about this issue to the submitting author. One possibility could be to list the region or country of origin corresponding to that of the CA, because the CA traditionally holds a position of responsibility among the listed authors, including the handling of submission [9]. All of the MMSs indicated in Fig. 1 only allow a single choice to be made. The choice becomes more complex as the size of the research team increases, or if the geographic origins of their members are very heterogeneous, even more so if there is intra-team rivalry for publishing-related visibility and prominence, particularly among middle authors [10].

Of note, the choice of a region or country does not prohibit an article from being submitted, and, faced with doubt, the CA can simply indicate their country or region to simplify the process. Yet, in this day and age of stricter post-publication peer review, where the content of MMSs may be scrutinized following the publication of a paper, it is possible that submission-related metadata could be subjected to an ethics investigation to ascertain whether the CA (on behalf of the authors) provided any false, misleading or inaccurate information during the submission process. Incorrect information about the regional or geographic source of an article, and therefore the source of its intellect, may have two drawbacks, depending on how that information is used by the journal or publisher. First, it misrepresents the geographic and cultural source of intellect or research. Second, the request by the MMS biases the geographic origin of a single contributor over all others in two- or multi-author collaborations that span more than one region or country. Given this inherent bias in information, why do editors, journals or publishers include this seemingly senseless request during the submission process? If it is being used for statistical purposes, such as to gain an appreciation of the regional, geographic or cultural heterogeneity of authors who

submit articles to that journal, including as part of corporate diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) programs, then those statistics will also be biased and inaccurate.

## 2. Evaluation case 2

To fortify the casually observed and discovered MMSs in case 1, and as part of an interest in the integrity of neuroscience journals, particularly aspects that might otherwise be considered “minor”, such as the integrity of information on MMSs, the top 50 neuroscience journals were selected based on their 2024 JCR impact factor in the Web of Science neurosciences category. Only those journals that employed Aries Systems’ Editorial Manager® were selected, while those journals that are by invitation only, or that used very specific MMSs, like Springer Nature’s Snapp, Nature Portfolio’s MTS, Wiley’s Research Exchange, or Taylor & Francis’ Submission Portal, as well as Silverchair’s ScholarOne, Inc., were excluded because a mandatory request for defining the geographic origin (i.e., “Region of Origin”, as observed in the three samples in Fig. 1) had not been observed by the author in those MMSs. After all exclusions, 16 of the top 50 neuroscience journals’ MMSs were analyzed (Table 1). In each MMS, wherever available, “original research article” or “research article” was selected as the manuscript type, and if not, another main manuscript type, like “review”, was selected for the dummy submission test, specifically to appreciate three aspects: 1) whether there was a “Region of Origin” (or similar) clause in the MMS; 2) in the case of the affirmative, whether that clause was mandatory; and 3) whether the drop-down menu allowed for multiple choices (i.e., two or more regions or countries).

Of the 16 MMSs analyzed, 12 allowed for the selection of “original research article” or similar, while nine had a mandatory DEI survey before submission could begin, all of Elsevier journals (Table 2). Most importantly, in terms of the objective of this exercise, of the 16 journals, only Brain Behavior and Immunity, published by Elsevier, had a mandatory “Region of Origin” request, which did not allow multiple choices to be made (Table 2). Even though the majority (34/50) of the top 50 neuroscience journals were excluded from

the analysis because they did not have a “Region of Origin” (or similar) clause in their MMSs, the presence of only one journal with a mandatory “Region of Origin” clause suggests that, on the whole, the editors of these top-ranked neuroscience journals have astutely removed (or not included) this clause in their journals’ MMSs.

### JOURNAL AND PUBLISHER RESPONSIBILITIES WITH RESPECT TO MANUSCRIPT MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

Publishers should explain openly how this data is used, to avoid claims of surveillance capitalism [11]. To the author’s knowledge, the jour-

nals in Fig. 1 do not indicate how this harvested data is being used by publishers. In the past few years, submissions to Elsevier journals using its Editorial Manager® have involved a mandatory DEI survey, in which the CA, or even authors confirming co-authorship of a paper submitted by the CA, must respond before they are able to complete the submission process or confirm their co-authorship [12]. This process would appear to be – in the author’s opinion – a deviation from the intended purpose of MMSs. If journals or publishers harvest such metadata provided by CAs, as mandatory clauses, they should add a transparent footnote to explain how such information and data is used.

**Table 1.** 16 of the top 50 neuroscience journals\* whose MMSs were examined

Journal	Publisher (imprint/brand)	MSS URL
<i>Translational Neurodegeneration</i>	Springer Nature (BMC)	<a href="https://www.editorialmanager.com/tneu/default.aspx">https://www.editorialmanager.com/tneu/default.aspx</a>
<i>Behavioral and Brain Sciences</i>	Cambridge University Press	<a href="https://www.editorialmanager.com/bbs/default.aspx">https://www.editorialmanager.com/bbs/default.aspx</a>
<i>Sleep Medicine Reviews</i>	Elsevier (W B Saunders Co. Ltd.)	<a href="https://www.editorialmanager.com/smr/default.aspx">https://www.editorialmanager.com/smr/default.aspx</a>
<i>Biological Psychiatry</i>	Elsevier Science Inc.	<a href="https://www.editorialmanager.com/bps/default.aspx">https://www.editorialmanager.com/bps/default.aspx</a>
<i>Brain Stimulation</i>	Elsevier Science Inc.	<a href="https://www.editorialmanager.com/brs/default.aspx">https://www.editorialmanager.com/brs/default.aspx</a>
<i>Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews</i>	Elsevier Science Inc. (Pergamon)	<a href="https://www.editorialmanager.com/neubiorev/default.aspx">https://www.editorialmanager.com/neubiorev/default.aspx</a>
<i>Brain Behavior and Immunity</i>	Elsevier Science Inc. (Academic Press)	<a href="https://www.editorialmanager.com/bbi/default.aspx">https://www.editorialmanager.com/bbi/default.aspx</a>
<i>Neurotherapeutics</i>	Elsevier Science Inc.	<a href="https://www2.cloud.editorialmanager.com/neurot/default2.aspx">https://www2.cloud.editorialmanager.com/neurot/default2.aspx</a>
<i>Alzheimer’s &amp; Dementia- Translational Research &amp; Clinical Interventions</i>	Wiley	<a href="https://www.editorialmanager.com/trci/default.aspx">https://www.editorialmanager.com/trci/default.aspx</a>
<i>European Neuropsychopharmacology</i>	Elsevier Science Inc.	<a href="https://www.editorialmanager.com/neupsy/default.aspx">https://www.editorialmanager.com/neupsy/default.aspx</a>
<i>Neural Regeneration Research</i>	Wolters Kluwer Medknow Publications	<a href="https://www.editorialmanager.com/nrr/default.aspx">https://www.editorialmanager.com/nrr/default.aspx</a>
<i>Frontiers in Neuroendocrinology</i>	Elsevier Science Inc. (Academic Press)	<a href="https://www.editorialmanager.com/fin/default.aspx">https://www.editorialmanager.com/fin/default.aspx</a>
<i>Neural Networks</i>	Elsevier Science Inc. (Pergamon)	<a href="https://www.editorialmanager.com/neunet/default.aspx">https://www.editorialmanager.com/neunet/default.aspx</a>
<i>Progress in Neurobiology</i>	Elsevier Science Inc. (Pergamon)	<a href="https://www.editorialmanager.com/proneu/default.aspx">https://www.editorialmanager.com/proneu/default.aspx</a>
<i>Neurobiology of Disease</i>	Elsevier Science Inc. (Academic Press)	<a href="https://www.editorialmanager.com/ynbdi/default.aspx">https://www.editorialmanager.com/ynbdi/default.aspx</a>
<i>Pain</i>	Lippincott Williams & Wilkins	<a href="https://www.editorialmanager.com/pain/default.aspx">https://www.editorialmanager.com/pain/default.aspx</a>

\* Search and examination on 21–23 July 2025, using the top 50 Web of Science neuroscience journals based on their 2024 JCR impact factor. *Abbreviations:* MMS, manuscript management system; URL, uniform resource locator



Mandatory requests on MMSs during the submission process must be sensible to avoid wasting the CA's precious time and resources, even more so if such requests do not have any direct academic link to the paper, or relevance to peer review or editorial screening, so mandatory MMS requirements that lack sensibility may erode authors' rights [13] if their concerns are improperly handled or not addressed at all. For this reason, it is important for journals that employ MMSs to obligatorily have a manuscript type, the author expression of concern (AEOC), that allows them to directly submit concerns that they have about a journal, in this case related to the MMS, and where those concerns are not only mediated and resolved by a neutral arbitrator, but published alongside the journal's resolution [14]. One simple solution would be for journals to allow CAs to submit a manuscript type, labelled as an AEOC, in which they are offered an opportunity to express their dissatisfaction with the conditions or requests on the journal's MMS,

in this case the ambiguity arising from the country or geographic origin of the work. So as to not occupy much space, the AEOC would be limited to 500 words and three references, allowing them to respectfully express their disagreement with the MMS content, or its management. The journal's editors would be tasked with offering a formal response, and after a reasonable amount of time (e.g., 3 weeks), the editors would be responsible for providing a formal response, which is then published alongside the AEOC, as an editorial. The editorial would offer the editors an opportunity to accept the concerns expressed in the AEOC and to enact changes that are explicitly explained, or to explain to readers why no changes to the MMS were made. This AEOC/editorial combination would send a clear signal to the journal's authorship that the concerns of CAs are not trivialized, it would respect authors' rights, and it would demonstrate that valid concerns by CAs about issues related to the MMS are not censored.

**Table 2.** Aspects of the 16 neuroscience journals' MMSs

Journal	Have "Region of Origin" (or similar) clause?	If Yes, mandatory?	Multiple choices allowed?	DEI survey mandatory?
<i>Translational Neurodegeneration</i>	No	N/A	N/A	No
<i>Behavioral and Brain Sciences</i>	No	N/A	N/A	No
<i>Sleep Medicine Reviews</i>	No	N/A	N/A	Yes
<i>Biological Psychiatry</i>	No	N/A	N/A	Yes
<i>Brain Stimulation</i>	No	N/A	N/A	Yes
<i>Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews</i>	No	N/A	N/A	No
<i>Brain Behavior and Immunity</i>	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
<i>Neurotherapeutics</i>	No	N/A	N/A	Yes
<i>Alzheimer's &amp; Dementia-Translational Research &amp; Clinical Interventions</i>	No	N/A	N/A	No
<i>European Neuropsychopharmacology</i>	No	N/A	N/A	Yes
<i>Neural Regeneration Research</i>	No	N/A	N/A	No
<i>Frontiers in Neuroendocrinology</i>	No	N/A	N/A	Yes
<i>Neural Networks</i>	No	N/A	N/A	Yes
<i>Progress in Neurobiology</i>	No	N/A	N/A	No
<i>Neurobiology of Disease</i>	No	N/A	N/A	Yes
<i>Pain</i>	No	N/A	N/A	No

Abbreviations: MMS, manuscript management system; N/A, not applicable

In recent years, an “oligopoly” of MMSs has emerged [15; 16], while major mergers and acquisitions shift the balance of power in the global for-profit academic market, such as the late-2024 acquisition of Clarivate’s ScholarOne by Silverchair [17]. Compounding this issue is a greater movement towards surveillance and data acquisition, as a way to combat rising risks in academic publishing, like paper mills [18]. Although these facts do not offer any explanation for the mandatory “Region of Origin” requests of the cases noted in Fig. 1 and Tables 1 and 2, they are nonetheless important for appreciating the MSS market.

### **SUGGESTIONS TO RESOLVE ISSUES AND IMPROVE MANUSCRIPT MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS**

In addition to the above suggestion that would allow CAs the ability to submit and publish an AEOC, journal editors and managers, as well as publishers, need to screen their MMSs to fully appreciate the sensibility of the content and choices that are offered to CAs, or the mandatory clauses that CAs need to respect during the submission process. To be mindful of a CA’s predicament related to the choices and selection requirements they might encounter during submission of their paper via an MMS. Considering that this information has no relevance to the academic content of submitted papers, such a request should be optional, not mandatory. It is also worth considering whether these data harvesting strategies related to the mandatory DEI survey or “Region of Origin” are in violation of one clause stated in the Aries Systems Corporation Privacy Policy, namely “While User Information may assist in the review and publication process, you are under no obligation to provide any User Information” (section 2), essentially with the MSS owner (Aries Systems Corporation) distancing itself from how journals and publishers use those MSSs and what data they harvest from them [19]. Editors and their journals should thus allow – via optional multi-select fields – multiple countries or regions to be selected to accommodate single au-

thors with multiple geographically diverse affiliations or multi-author teams from different global geographic regions to offer a realistic, balanced and unbiased representation of the source/origin of that work and intellect. Where the CA might be confused or uncertain of what or how to respond to request on the MMS, it should include explanatory tooltips for guidance. Finally, the MSS should include transparency notes on how metadata is used, either as an in-built set of explanations, as a footnote, or via a simple pop-up screen. Finally, regarding the mandatory DEI questionnaire whenever an author or user enters Elsevier journals’ MSSs, via Editorial Manager®, Elsevier admits that “answering the questions for each journal with which you interact can be frustrating” [20].

### **CASE LIMITATIONS**

This study has an obvious limitation. The examples provided in Fig. 1 cases represent only select journals to which the author had personally submitted, so they constitute random chance discoveries. A more systematic assessment of how widely this aspect exists, for example, among MMSs used by a single publisher, or within a specific field of study, is clearly needed. To that end, evaluation of case 2 was conducted on a defined set of 16 top-ranked neuroscience journals (Tables 1, 2), although not all manuscript types were verified. Moreover, neuroscience journals of other ranks, specifically of lower JCR impact factors, might reveal a different ratio of “Region of Origin” clauses in their MMSs. Finally, academics need to retain a healthy level of skepticism, and pay much closer attention to the tools that they are using for the submission of their research and intellect, like MMSs. To avoid potential abuses of MMSs by journals or publishers, with the risk of amplifying risks like cultural misattribution, unjustified visibility hierarchies, or DEI performativity, they need to examine and question the choices that they are offered and that they have to make, without taking such tools for granted and without placing full trust in their design.

### **AUTHOR’S CONTRIBUTIONS**

The author contributed to all aspects of the paper: conceptualization, recording MMS content, interpretation, writing and editing. No AI was used for any of these functions.

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### CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares no relevant conflicts of interest.

### DISCLAIMER

The author submitted one or more papers to all of the journals whose EMs were scrutinized in Fig. 1 and Tables 1 and 2, having published in two of the former.

### DATA AVAILABILITY

The “data” used in this paper is in the form of screenshots employed in Fig. 1, as well as journal metadata that appears in Tables 1 and 2.

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