

Roles and responsibilities of the special-section editor

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Interpretation differs from most journals in that each issue is built largely on special sections that focus on integrated multidisciplinary approaches, techniques in exploration and production, on a specific technology, on a specific basin, or on a specific type of geologic process or feature common to multiple basins. Such special sections provide the reader with the perspective and expertise of authors from different institutions and disciplines focused on the same problem. Depending on the topic, the resulting collection of papers may exhibit diversity, consensus, or both.

While the editorial board of a given journal may be able to identify a subset of candidate topics for special sections, in-depth knowledge of critical problems and of the key players working on such topics is usually beyond their areas of expertise. To address this need, *Interpretation* draws upon such experts to construct most special sections.

In addition to providing a focused collection of articles on a given topic, there are two additional advantages of the special-section format. First, the journal broadens the scope of contributors beyond those whose career advancement (typically in academia and in government laboratories) requires them to publish in peer-reviewed journals. Typically, the special-section organizers will identify oral presentations and expanded abstracts presented at meetings (such as SEG, AAPG, URTEC, OTC, and SPE) and ask the authors to expand upon their work and generate a more comprehensive document. Apart from a few technology companies, most companies do not use external publications as a component of career development. For this reason, requests by a respected special editorial team provides not only recognition to the authors, but also the justification of the authors' management to allow them to build on their work. Nearly all companies include the act of supporting communities among their core values. Contributing to a special section is a great way for professionals to demonstrate that value in action. Other advantages include the perspectives provided by such special-section authors, editors, and reviewers that draw in a diverse suite of geoscientists

and engineers that truly represent the interpretation community.

Where there are advantages, there are also disadvantages. First, the vast majority of special-section editors are "new to the job," never having served on an editorial board of a peer-reviewed scientific journal. The primary objective of this "From the Editor" note is to clarify the roles and responsibilities of this task. Second, many of the selected reviewers may never have had the opportunity to review a paper for publication. They too are new to the job. The August issue of the From the Editor column (Bui et al., 2017) titled "Qualities of a good reviewer" directly addresses this challenge. In this article, we encourage the reviewers to help the authors to construct a quality, well-referenced paper because many of them, too, are new to the job. The third disadvantage is that the special-section format skews the citation-index metrics. Obviously, if the special-section editors identify a good oral presentation and request the author to develop a full-length paper, the chances of acceptance are higher, thus lowering the citation index score. More on this conundrum will be found in the From the Editor column in the February 2018 issue of *Interpretation*.

The remainder of this short article addresses the issues specific to the special-section editors.

Defining the special-section topic

Special-section topics come from two sources: the *Interpretation* editorial board members who are charged with initiating at least two special sections each year, and from the interpretation community at large. To propose a special section, simply e-mail interpretation@seg.org, provide a paragraph describing the focus, and include a list of potential special-section editors who have agreed to participate. A compendium of recent special section topics can be found at <http://library.seg.org/page/Interpretation-special-sections>.

Enlisting a special-section editorial team and special-section authors

Depending on the topic, there will be a special-section lead editor and a cadre of coeditors. If you work in industry, constructing such a group of coeditors

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provides an opportunity to work closely with competitors, clients, and technology providers under the umbrella of the SEG and AAPG professional societies. It is not required, but it is a best practice that each editor of the special section coauthor one of the papers. In this manner, if there are four editors, the chances increase of having the minimum of three accepted papers for a special section. By the same token, more editors (and hence authors or coauthors) are better: having several editors increases the depth and scope of the special section and decreases the work load of reviewing the papers. Because they are experts in the field, these special-section editors also serve as reviewers for some of the papers.

Populating a special section can be challenging for various reasons. For example, in Oklahoma, oil companies are aggressively bidding for acreage over the STACK and SCOOP plays (Brown, 2014). The chances that these oil companies will allow participation in a special section before the acreage is spoken for are limited. Likewise, if a company is the lead operator in a basin or in a given technology, there may be limited incentives to share their best practices with the competition.

The best time to find authors is at or soon after the international SEG, AAPG, URTEC, OTC, or SPE annual meetings, after more focused regional meetings, or after professional society workshops. If coeditors are there, invite them to breakfast and identify target contributors. Ideally, track down that contributor at the same meeting and invite them. If this is not an option, a personal phone call followed up with an e-mail works better than a simple e-mail.

Unlike academics who either publish or perish, most authors of a special section have more pressing priorities and often require some follow-up and encouragement to meet the timeline. Scheduling a conference call among coeditors several times during the process can help move things along.

The editorial process

Figure 1 in the “From the Editor” column in the previous issue of *Interpretation* (Bui et al., 2017) summarizes the review process. For special sections, the editorial board members take on the role of special-section associate editors, with one of the editors taking on the role of special-section assistant editor. Typically, they request reviews from three or four reviewers. Some reviewers are experts in the topic, while others may be better able to judge if the paper can be read by a non-expert. It is common for the editors to serve as reviewers of each other’s papers. Like the editors, the reviewers also have a busy schedule. While busy schedules may delay a review, the most common reason for a tardy review is a paper that is poorly constructed or has bad grammar. If this is the case, the editors should encourage the reviewers to minimize their time investment, add what constructive criticism or suggestions that they have, and send the manuscript back to the authors to rework their paper for the next revision. A rejected paper

is better than a paper that has no review at all that considerably delays the final review process.

Special challenges for any editor, special or otherwise

The challenges of being a special-section editor are the same as those of standing editors for *Geophysics* and the standing associate deputy editors for *Interpretation*, with one exception: the special sections all have a specific target date, so that it is important that papers do not slide beyond the targeted publication date. The authors of this article, who have logged more than 100 years as editors for *GEOPHYSICS*, *Interpretation*, and the *AAPG Bulletin*, share the following observations:

- It is rare that the first three reviewers that you invite will agree to review. Travel commitments, job demands, conflict of interest, personal or family illness, or “reviewer fatigue” often prevent a good candidate from agreeing to review a given paper. Unless you know a given reviewer will commit, be prepared to invite a fourth or even fifth reviewer soon after you receive a paper.
- We live in a world of constant digital bombardment. E-mail invitations are often lost in a sea of requests, announcements, SPAM, and phishing. If a reviewer does not respond within a few days, follow up with another e-mail or better yet with a phone call.
- While the SEG staff sends out notices once a paper has been assigned to a special-section editor, and when a review has been completed, the mind becomes quickly numb. A best practice is to set a specific time each week to visit the special-section editor site <https://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/interpretation> (Manage > Assistant Editor Center) to determine if new papers have been assigned or if reviews have been returned.
- At least one large oil company treats e-mail from manuscriptcentral.com as SPAM. If you haven’t heard from a reviewer you expected to commit, follow up with a personal e-mail under the user ID normally use to determine if they received the invite.
- We also live in a world of job instability. Depending on the company, e-mail accounts of a targeted reviewer may not be deactivated after their change in employment status. The lack of a response may indicate the targeted reviewer is no longer at that e-mail address.
- Although a given reviewer has agreed to review, work commitments, travel requirements, or health issues may arise within the four-week review period. We all also have friends and colleagues who overcommit. If they are late with a review, and you don’t obtain a response, this is the time to call in a favor and obtain a new reviewer.

- Finally, if problems arise and if deadlines are sliding, it is time to call the SEG staff for help. The current contact person for such issues is SEG manuscript tracking specialist, Ms. Sheral Danker, at sdanker@seg.org. Do not be reluctant to call for help, Sheral considers this to be one her primary job responsibilities.

In summary, the role of the special section editor is equivalent to that of the deputy editor-in-chief (currently Hongliu Zeng) who has a suite of deputy associate editors (<http://seg.org/About-SEG/Governance/Committees?cn=Interpretation+Editors>) to help with the task of reviewing papers submitted to the general "Technical papers" section of *Interpretation*. The major difference is that Hongliu and his colleagues have

played this role for several years, so they are familiar with the process and sensitive to common causes for delays of reviews. In contrast, the role of special-section editors is often a learning process, but with the understanding that their role ends when the special section is published.

References

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