A COPE Perspective on Research Integrity

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A Brief History of COPE

• Informal meeting April 1997 of “concerned editors” as experiment
  • Richard Smith (then editor of the *BMJ*) stated: “it [COPE] may not prove useful in the long term, and we will be delighted if it is made unnecessary because the international profession produces an adequate response to research misconduct”.

• 20 years later COPE is
  • A registered charity and charitable company in the UK
  • Governed by a Trustee Board of 12 elected Council Members

• COPE is NOT a regulatory body
• As an organization, COPE’s role is to assist editors of scholarly journals and publisher/owners in their endeavour to **preserve and promote the integrity of the scholarly record** through policies and practices that reflect the current best principles of transparency as well as integrity.

• COPE is a membership organization. Our members are primarily editors of **journals and publishers** although we are currently exploring expanding our membership. Part of this potential expansion is being explored with a pilot project with **five universities around the world**.

• COPE operates, manages and governs the organization with a small group of paid employees and a large **group of very active volunteers** who serve on the trustee board and council.
COPE assists editors of scholarly journals and publishers - as well as other parties, such as institutions - in their work to preserve and promote the integrity of the scholarly record through policies and practices. COPE describes these in 10 “Core Practices”. COPE's Core Practices should be considered alongside specific national and international codes of conduct for research.

Core practices are the policies and practices journals and publishers need, to reach the highest standards in publication ethics. We include cases with advice, guidance for day-to-day practice, education modules and events on topical issues, to support journals and publishers fulfil their policies.

COPE's Core Practices

1. Allegations of misconduct
2. Authorship and contributorship
3. Complaints and appeals
4. Conflicts of interest / Competing interests
5. Data and reproducibility
6. Ethical oversight
7. Intellectual property
8. Journal management
9. Peer review processes
10. Post-publication discussions and corrections

https://publicationethics.org/core-practices
1. Allegations of misconduct

Journals should have a clearly described process for handling allegations, however they are brought to the journal's or publisher’s attention. Journals must take seriously allegations of misconduct pre-publication and post-publication. Policies should include how to handle allegations from whistleblowers.

2. Authorship and contributorship

Clear policies (that allow for transparency around who contributed to the work and in what capacity) should be in place for requirements for authorship and contributorship as well as processes for managing potential disputes.
3. Complaints and appeals

Journals should have a clearly described process for handling complaints against the journal, its staff, editorial board or publisher.

4. Conflicts of interest

There must be clear definitions of conflicts of interest and processes for handling conflicts of interest of authors, reviewers, editors, journals and publishers, whether identified before or after publication.
5. Data and reproducibility

Journals should include policies on data availability and encourage the use of reporting guidelines and registration of clinical trials and other study designs according to standard practice in their discipline.

6. Ethical oversight

Ethical oversight should include, but is not limited to, policies on consent to publication, publication on vulnerable populations, ethical conduct of research using animals, ethical conduct of research using human subjects, handling confidential data and of business/marketing practices.
7. Intellectual property

All policies on intellectual property, including copyright and publishing licenses, should be clearly described. In addition, any costs associated with publishing should be obvious to authors and readers. Policies should be clear on what counts as prepublication that will preclude consideration. What constitutes plagiarism and redundant/overlapping publication should be specified.

8. Journal management

A well-described and implemented infrastructure is essential, including the business model, policies, processes and software for efficient running of an editorially independent journal, as well as the efficient management and training of editorial boards and editorial and publishing staff.
9. Peer review processes

All peer review processes must be transparently described and well managed. Journals should provide training for editors and reviewers and have policies on diverse aspects of peer review, especially with respect to adoption of appropriate models of review and processes for handling conflicts of interest, appeals and disputes that may arise in peer review.

10. Post-publication discussions, corrections

Journals must allow debate post publication either on their site, through letters to the editor, or on an external moderated site, such as PubMed Commons or PubPeer. They must have mechanisms for correcting, revising or retracting articles after publication.
Allegations of misconduct

Each core practice provides COPE resources for recognizing and managing the issue.

Not all resources are applicable to all members or disciplines.
A look at some of our tools

Cases
Advice
Flowcharts
Discussion documents
Guidelines
Cases

Withdrawing from authorship (17-10). A paper is under investigation by the institution for misconduct. After investigations started, an author asked to be removed from authorship. What should the journal do?

ADVICE: Postpone any decision until after the investigation. Consider publishing an expression of concern. Await the outcome of the investigation before making any changes to the paper. This could be thought of as an authorship dispute. Are all the authors from the same institution? The author may have a legitimate reason for wanting to be removed if he is from a different institution. A suggestion for the editor was to ask the author why he wishes to be removed from the article. Most of the Forum agreed with a robust “no” to the request, and with contacting the institution.

https://publicationethics.org/case/withdrawing-authorship
Cases

Duplicate submission (09-15). We received a manuscript for consideration. The editor-in-chief received an invitation from another journal to review the same paper. We emailed the authors of the paper asking for an explanation. The authors withdrew their paper from the second journal. The corresponding author hoped that we would still consider his submission. We are unsure as to how to proceed.

ADVICE: There was conflicting advice. Some suggested rejecting the paper, while others thought it was more appropriate to write a firm letter to the authors explaining that their behaviour was unacceptable. It was also suggested copying the letter to the dean of the author’s institution so that the institution could put in place guidelines on submission of papers so that this does not occur again.

Advice

Signs that might indicate authorship problems

- Corresponding author is unable to respond to reviewers’ comments.
- Changes are made by somebody not on the author list (check Word document properties but there may be an innocent explanation)
- Document properties show the manuscript was drafted by someone not on the author list or properly acknowledged (but see above)
- Impossibly prolific author e.g. of review articles/opinion pieces (detected by a Medline or Google search using the author’s name)
- Several similar review articles/editorials/opinion pieces published under different author names (detected by a Medline or Google search)
- Role missing from list of contributors (e.g. it appears that none of the authors were responsible for analysing the data or drafting the paper)
- Unfeasibly long or short author list (e.g. a simple case report with a dozen authors or a randomised trial with a single author)
Advice

How to recognise potential manipulation of the peer review process

The features or patterns of activity shown are suggested to help recognise potential signs of peer review manipulation.

Often it is the occurrence of these features in combination that may indicate a potential issue.

publicationethics.org

(b) Suspected fabricated data in a published manuscript

What to do if you suspect fabricated data

Committee on Publication Ethics
PREPRINTS

BACKGROUND/CONTEXT

A preprint is a scholarly manuscript posted by the author(s) in an openly accessible platform, usually before or in parallel with the peer review process. While the sharing of manuscripts via preprint platforms has been common in some disciplines (such as physics and mathematics) for many years, uptake in other disciplines traditionally had been low, possibly influenced by differences in research culture and strong opposition by some journal publishers [1]. The landscape has evolved rapidly in other fields in recent years, however, thanks to the launch of additional, discipline-specific preprint platforms and increased support by funders and initiatives such as ASAPBio [2, 3].

WHY USE PREPRINTS?

Preprint servers provide researchers with a platform to disseminate their work quickly and broadly, in a shorter timeframe than that needed at a peer-reviewed journal. Researchers can establish precedence and may be able to obtain feedback before (or, sometimes, in parallel with) peer review at a journal and from a wider audience than the two or three reviewers traditionally involved in reviewing manuscripts. The availability of preprints can also facilitate interactions between researchers working on similar areas or projects, and may help foster collaboration between groups. Some funders allow inclusion of preprints in grant applications [4] and thus, posting work as a preprint can help authors to provide evidence of research productivity.
What constitutes authorship? This document aims to stimulate discussion around the most common authorship issues faced by COPE members. It discusses existing guidelines on authorship, puts together some basic principles to help prevent common problems, and sets out some of the more thorny issues that have come to light in previous discussions, many of which are discipline-specific and which require more nuanced consideration.
Guidelines: Retractions

This is an extract. Please, read the whole guideline. Editors should consider retracting a publication if:

• They have evidence that the findings are **unreliable**, either as a result of misconduct (e.g. data fabrication) or honest error (e.g. miscalculation)

• The findings have been **published elsewhere** without cross-referencing, permission or justification (i.e. redundant publication)

• It constitutes **plagiarism** or reports **unethical research**

Retraction is a mechanism for correcting the literature and alerting readers to publications that contain such seriously flawed or erroneous data that their findings and conclusions cannot be relied upon. Unreliable data may result from honest error or from research misconduct.

The **main purpose of retractions is to correct the literature** and ensure its integrity rather than to punish authors who misbehave.

The People behind COPE 2018