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Publication Ethics and the Editorial Office: Creating Policies and Practices to Facilitate Handling Publication Ethics Matters

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Editors' Note: Christy Collins is the winner of the 2019 ISMTE Ira Salkin Scholarship. Below is her winning essay on the topic, "How can editorial offices create proactive policies that make handling publication ethics matters smoother?"

Publishing has long been considered a "gentleman's business," an industry based on a strong sense of respect and trust between publishers and their content providers such as authors and editors. Even though the term now sounds anachronistic, the values it represents—of mutual respect and the assumption of goodwill—are surely values we wish to keep at the heart of our industry. Scholarly publishing, in particular, is built on the assumption of the good intentions of all its contributors; while it might be tempting, when faced with today's publishing ethics complexities, to move away from the trust and assumption of integrity of all those involved in the system, it would surely benefit the industry as well as the community of scholars and researchers if we can continue to uphold integrity and the principles of good scholarship as the expected standard and continue to consider any violations as the exception rather than the rule.

We are in a period of unprecedented expansion in which research is being conducted. This has vastly increased the complexity of dealing with the submissions coming in to editorial offices. At the same time, all branches of publishing are seeing an increase in ethically questionable methods for constructing texts. Trade publishing, for example, is seeing unacknowledged ghost writers plagiarizing online texts and making only minor amendments in order to deliver ghost-written texts to self-publishing "authors" at dirt cheap prices. The proliferation of online texts, and especially self-published texts, provides ever-increasing opportunities for plagiarism.

In scholarly publishing, as Markovitch has observed, conflicts of interest are often at the heart of publication ethics concerns. This includes "individual friendships (and hostilities), national, political, or religious differences, or an apparently innocent desire to further the aims of a particular pressure group that the author or reviewer considers beneficial to society."[1] Further, Lippworth and Kerridge have observed that the power relations involved in the peer-review process are "complex and dynamic, and may have positive and negative features, and that even where power is experienced as controlling, restrictive, and illegitimate, it can also be resisted."[2] As a result, the complexities of any given matter may not be obvious when an ethical breach first comes to light. The power relations involved might be thought of not as simple and unidirectional in terms of "dominance of reviewers and editors over authors, but rather as a shifting 'net' of power relations."

The level of preparedness for dealing with ethical breaches can differ between disciplines and between editorial offices. For example, Jordan and Hill's research[3] found that journals in political science are not well prepared for the ethical challenges they may face, and that the development of ethical standards and practices in this field are not yet well developed. At the same time, Beddoes[4,5] has called for a greater examination of the discursive politics of the peer-review process. Her work draws attention to the fact that certain views may be silenced or excluded by the process and that interdisciplinary studies and papers from outside the main area treated by the journal, are especially apt to suffer from conflicting responses from reviewers, which may lead to their rejection even if the quality of the work is good.

Practical Steps

As the globalization of research gains strength, it can be difficult to maintain relationships with the new contributors to your journal, but proactively building and maintaining good relationships with contributors is the key to sourcing strong content as well as being able to deal with issues when they arise. Staying abreast of upcoming areas and new research institutes and study groups in your field is always helpful, but this can be difficult when the journal is broad or interdisciplinary in scope. As a result, it's important to have an editorial board that represents a good spread of disciplinary expertise and geographical engagement. Staying engaged with your contributing community—whether in person or via an active editorial board—will increase the chances of receiving good-quality submissions across the scope of the journal's interests and will help in dealing with concerns about that content when and if they arise.

Personable template messages set to send to contributors, clearly indicating who the editors of the journal are and how they can be contacted throughout the process, can also help with setting a tone that invites contributors to raise any concerns, should have them. True engagement with the community entails responsiveness to enquiries of all types, as initial enquiries can appear in different forms, and ethics concerns may not be raised on first contact when authors may be feeling out the editor or administrator before disclosing more information.

A good way to stay engaged, and thinking ahead of potential issues, is to be aware of industry standard ethical guidelines and, if applicable, the policies and procedures set out by your publisher. Publishers differ, to some extent, in how they prefer these matters are dealt with, but be sure to avail yourself of their expertise and support. They have dealt with a wide variety of ethical matters and have experience and resources to draw on: If you are partnered with an external publisher, you are not alone with this issue, and your publisher wants to support you in responding to these matters. If you have any concerns, get in contact with your primary contact at the publisher, and they will be able to assist you in how to move forward.

Other resources, such as those provided by COPE (the Committee on Publication Ethics), can help you and your team to stay abreast of best practices in dealing with publication ethics. COPE's resources include case studies, workflows, and discussions of sample scenarios, all of which can be helpful in talking about ethical considerations in the editorial office and with editorial board members. Attending events and webinars run by your publisher or COPE, so that you are well informed about the publication ethics landscape, will ensure that you are alert to possible concerns and will build up your skill set before you face a serious breach or have an issue brought to your attention.

There are a number of tools available and emerging to help with identifying ethical breaches. For example, artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly able to identify image manipulation, and the technology for this is developing all the time. Tools such as iThenticate (formerly CrossCheck) are useful in checking manuscripts for unacknowledged similarities to other published texts. iThenticate provides a useful check for submissions that can be built into your workflow. Like all such tools, these require an intelligent user in order to make them sufficiently nuanced tools that are useful in the peer-review workflow. It is important to treat the output of all such tools with caution and treat each text on a case-by-case basis.

Using a reputable submission system to manage the peer-review process, across all decision makers, and using it as consistently as reasonably possible, ensures good records are kept in case someone later needs to retrace the peer-review process and flag any anomalies. In addition, some simple additional checks can be put in place for administration staff or first-decision makers, such as checking that the various authors and their institutions actually exist. A simple Google search will establish this in most cases. While many journals no longer request suggested reviewers, if your journal still practices this, it is especially important to check the identities of all parties. Requesting a stable identifier for each individual, such as their ORCID identifier, can help protect the journal from fraudulent activity by ensuring you have on record the identity of all authors and reviewers. Confirmation emails that "bounce" may be a flag to investigate further, as fake email addresses are another possible hallmark of fraudulent papers.

Finally, it is worth bearing in mind that the primary goal of upholding the standards of the peer-review process and publication ethics is to ensure the integrity of the publishing record, to protect the public, and to uphold the ideals of the highest standards of research and the academy, rather than to shame individuals or discredit institutions. When facing a publishing ethics dilemma, it is wise to focus on the integrity of your journal and its content, rather than on taking a punitive stance or becoming involved in conflicts and differences of opinion that may flare up from time to time in the research community.

Together, publishers, authors, reviewers, and editorial teams ensure that the publishing record can be relied upon as a basis for future research as well as for supporting real-world applications such as policy and clinical decisions. This role is central to the *raison d'etre* for the entire industry and something we can be proud to uphold and protect in our day-to-day work.

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