Ethical peer review in a changing & challenging scholarly publication world

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What is (editorial) peer review?

Peer review in scholarly publishing is the process by which research output is subjected to scrutiny and critical assessment by individuals who are experts in those areas.

(Hames, 2012, in *Academic and Professional Publishing*, Chandos Publishing, Eds Campbell, Pentz and Borthwick, p.16)

and

…the critical assessment of manuscripts submitted to journals by experts who are not usually part of the editorial staff

(ICMJE, International Committee of Medical Journal Editors, http://www.icmje.org/)

Critical role of the 'Editor'

"…[peer review] works as well as can be expected. <u>The critical feature that makes the system work is the skill and insight of the editor.</u> Astute editors can use the system well, the less able who follow reviewer comments uncritically bring the system into disrepute."

(a respondent, Ware & Monkman, 2008, PRC peer review survey)

"Unfortunately, all too often editors relinquish their responsibilities and treat the peer review process as a vote … <u>the real problem is editors … increasingly, one sees editors who don't use any judgement at all</u>, but just keep going back to reviewers until there is agreement."

[Dorothy Bishop, Professor of Developmental Neuropsychology, Oxford University, 'In defence of peer review', comment 4 Jan 2011, to R Smith (2010) *Breast Cancer Research*, 12(Suppl 4):S13]

How has peer review been changing?

- Increasing transparency and openness

- Increasing interaction

- Post-publication peer review

- New models of peer review

- New third-party services
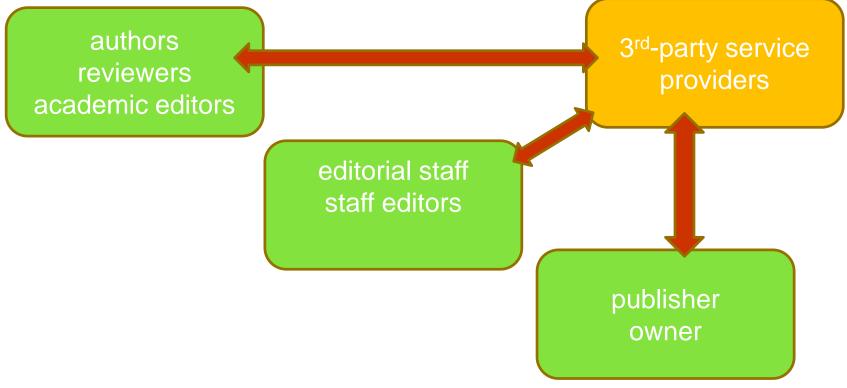
The people involved in peer review

authors
reviewers
academic editors

editorial staff
staff editors

publisher
owner

➢ Everyone involved should always act according to the highest ethical standards

➢ Submission and peer review information shouldn't be used for personal gain or to disadvantage/discredit others

The people involved in peer review

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┌─────────────────────┐                          ┌─────────────────────┐
│      authors        │ ◄──────────────────────► │  3rd-party service  │
│     reviewers       │                          │     providers       │
│  academic editors   │                          │                     │
└─────────────────────┘        ┌─────────────────┘                     │
                               │                 └─────────────────────┘
                    ┌──────────┴──────────┐                ▲
                    │   editorial staff   │ ◄──────────────┘
                    │    staff editors    │                │
                    │                     │                ▼
                    └─────────────────────┘      ┌─────────────────────┐
                                                 │     publisher       │
                                                 │       owner         │
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Third-party services

Codes of conduct?

Ethical guidelines for users?

Responsibilities remain the same

- To the authors

- To the reviewers

- To the readers

- To the community and scholarly literature

Responsibilities remain the same

- To the authors   …   of the authors

- To the reviewers   …   of the reviewers

- To the readers   …   of the readers

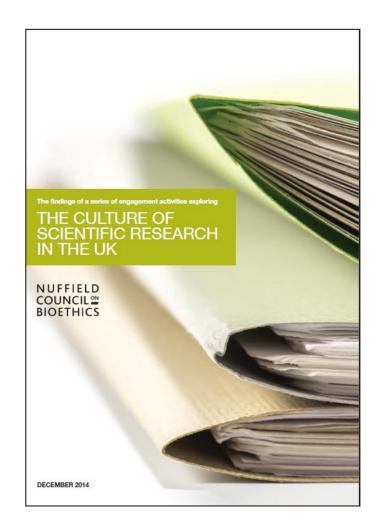- To the community and scholarly literature …   of the community and scholarly literature

Challenges

- Lack of knowledge

- Lack of awareness

- Expectations and norms changing

- All competing for the same pool of reviewers (& authors, editors)

- Researchers under increasing pressure

(Souter, 2011: "*Any system with so much at stake is bound to strain ethical principles.*")

Nuffield Council on Bioethics, 2014
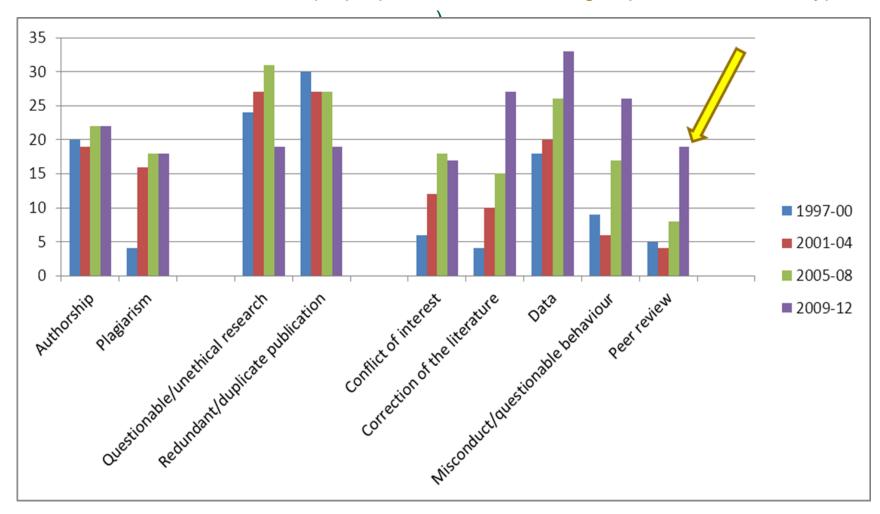
Science researchers in the UK

- Tempted or under pressure to compromise on research integrity and standards: 26%

- Aware of others feeling like this: 58%

- "*A higher proportion of respondents aged under 35 years (33 per cent) stated they had felt tempted or under pressure in comparison with those aged above 35 years (21 per cent).*"

The findings of a series of engagement activities exploring

THE CULTURE OF SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH IN THE UK

NUFFIELD COUNCIL ON BIOETHICS

DECEMBER 2014

COPE cases, 1997-2012, number per Classification (http://publicationethics.org/cope-case-taxonomy)

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COPE COMMITTEE ON PUBLICATION ETHICS

COPE Ethical Guidelines for Peer Reviewers

Irene Hames on behalf of COPE Council
March 2013, v.1

Peer review in all its form plays an important role in ensuring the integrity of the scholarly record. The process depends to a large extent on trust, and requires that everyone involved behaves responsibly and ethically. Peer reviewers play a central and critical part in the peer-review process, but too often come to the role without any guidance and may be unaware of their ethical obligations. The COPE Ethical Guidelines for Peer Reviewers set out the basic principles and standards to which all peer reviewers should adhere during the peer-review process. It is hoped they will provide helpful guidance to researchers, be a reference for journals and editors in guiding their reviewers, and act as an educational resource for institutions in training their students and researchers.

Basic principles to which peer reviewers should adhere

Peer reviewers should:

- only agree to review manuscripts for which they have the subject expertise required to carry out a proper assessment and which they can assess in a timely manner

'COPE's new Ethical Guidelines for Peer Reviewers: background, issues, and evolution',
ISMTE, *EON* May 2013, Vol6, issue4,
http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.ismte.org/resource/resmgr/files/hames_article.pdf

'Fake reviewer' cases

Retraction Watch

Tracking retractions

Retraction count grows to 35 for scientist who faked emails to do his own peer review

with 9 comments

Hyung-In Moon, the South Korean plant compound researcher who made up email addresses so he could do his own peer review, is now up to 35 retractions.

The four new retractions are of the papers in the *Journal of Enzyme Inhibition and Medicinal Chemistry* that initially led to suspicions when all the reviews came back within 24 hours. Here's the notice, which includes the same language as Moon's 24 other retractions of studies published in Informa Healthcare journals:

> The corresponding author and publisher hereby retract the following articles from publication in *Journal of Enzyme Inhibition and Medicinal Chemistry*.
>
> Effect of betaine on the hepatic damage from orotic acid-induced fatty liver development in rats
>
> Jae-Young Cha, Hyeong-Soo Kim, Hyung-In Moon, and Young-Su Cho

Hyung-In Moon

'For his part, Moon acknowledged suggesting his friends and colleagues as reviewers, telling Retraction Watch that the results "can be mistaken for fake reviews." But he said it wasn't only his mistake: The editors, Moon said, invited those reviews without confirming the identity of the reviewers.'

Since 2012 …

- More cases of authors submitting fake reviewer emails

- Editors creating fake reviewer accounts (to submit favourable reports)

- Third-party services suggesting fake reviewers

- August 2015, ~250 retractions because of fake peer review (see *Retraction Watch* 'faked emails' posts)

From retraction notes

- "*The Publisher and Editor regretfully retract this article because the peer-review process was inappropriately influenced and compromised. As a result, the scientific integrity of the article cannot be guaranteed*"

- "*The Editor was misled into accepting this article based upon the positive advice of at least one faked reviewer report. The report was submitted from a fictitious email account which was provided to the Editor by the corresponding author during the submission of the article*"

- "*The peer-review process for all of the above articles was found to have been compromised and inappropriately influenced by the corresponding author …. The publisher acknowledges that the integrity of the peer review process should have been subject to more rigorous verification to ensure the reviews provided were genuine and impartial.*"

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Editorial checking and verification

- WAME policy statement/guidance April 2015: *Avoiding selection of fraudulent peer reviewers*

  - Avoid using only author-recommended peer reviewers
  - Independent validation of contact information of author-recommended reviewers
  - ORCID as possible mechanism to validate reviewer identity/contact information
  - Be alert to possible peer review manipulation

"While these recommendations are intended to help prevent the problem of fraudulent peer review, other methods to subvert peer review undoubtedly will be developed."

- Whose responsibility is checking and verification at your journal/organisation?

Some unethical peer-review practices

Editors acting as reviewers for manuscripts they're handling

- Shouldn't do this via an anonymous review
- Should be done transparently – in a named review or in the editorial correspondence

Why?

➢ Who oversees an editor's review and comments?

➢ What if there are no other reviewers?

➢ It's misleading the authors, it's a deception, it's unethical

THE WORLD UNIVERSITY RANKINGS
PROFESSIONAL   JOBS   RANKINGS   STUDENT NEW

Journal editors' anonymous reviews criticised by Cope

Publication ethics committee issues new guidelines for peer review

April 4 2013

'ghostwritten' reviews

- The Scholarly Kitchen, 31 July 2012, Tim Vines: *The referee who wasn't there: the ghostly tale of reviewe*r 3

- Researchers: "this is an appalling practice"; "it is alarming to think people feel the practice is acceptable"

- Editor: "I would regard it as fraud to give such comments the status of an anonymous peer reviewer"

Peer reviewers should

… if they are the editor handling a manuscript and decide themselves to provide a review of that manuscript, do this transparently and not under the guise of an anonymous review if the journal operates blind review; providing a review for a manuscript being handled by another editor at the journal can be treated as any other review.

COPE Ethical Guidelines for Peer Reviewers

Selective editing of reviews

Journal cut positive comments, author claims

Essex scholar raises fears over peer review integrity

May 2 2013

- Shouldn't be done to justify a specific decision
- Decision-making should be transparent - reasons for decisions should be outlined

When is editing of reviews permissible?

- To remove derogatory or libellous comments
- Comments contrary to journal policy included

… or clarification in editorial correspondence

- Unfortunate use of language that might cause offence or imply something clearly not intended

- Colloquial or confusing language

Unethical citation pressure

'Coercive citation'

The Scholarly Kitchen, 2 February 2012, Phil Davis: *When journal editors coerce authors to self-cite*

What can be done with peer reviews?

Enables reviewers to list their entire review history, including their reviews for non-Elsevier journals

COPE Code of Conduct for Journal Editors

- **3.4** A description of peer review processes should be published, and editors should be ready to justify any important deviation from the described processes

- **3.6** Editors should publish guidance to authors on everything that is expected of them

- **4.1** Editors should provide guidance to reviewers on everything that is expected of them including the need to handle submitted material in confidence

- **7.2** Editors should have systems to ensure that material submitted to their journals remains confidential while under review

Thank you … questions?

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