

Sharing of information among editors-in-chief regarding possible misconduct: COPE Discussion Document

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This paper aims to stimulate discussion about the sharing of information among editors-in-chief regarding possible misconduct in their journals. We encourage journal editors and publishers to comment (whether or not they are COPE members), and also welcome comments from researchers/authors and academic institutions. Please email all comments to Natalie Ridgeway, COPE Operations Manager at <http://publicationethics.org/contact-us>

Introduction

This guidance has been drafted following a COPE Discussion Forum, in the wake of a number of high-profile cases of research misconduct in which the sharing of information between the relevant editors-in-chief (EiCs) was crucial to the final settlement of the cases¹.

Background

The ability of EiCs to share information allows them to:

- share concerns about specific cases of suspected misconduct.
- compare different versions of the same work submitted to different journals.
- compare the explanations provided by investigators/authors to questions resulting from concerns over submitted work.
- discuss and plan strategies for investigating cases of suspected misconduct.
- work together when approaching investigators/authors and/or their institutions, thus presenting a unified approach, especially when multiple papers are involved.
- ensure as efficient a process as possible from the journals' perspective².

Such a joint approach to suspected cases may lead to faster resolution, as well as strengthen the pursuit of those where further investigation is warranted.

However, it is acknowledged that work submitted to journals for publication should ordinarily be handled in confidence³. Further, there is a concern that such sharing of information risks accusations and/or legal claims of defamation – especially where the investigators/authors are innocent. It is also acknowledged that the following guidance from COPE may not offer legal protection against such claims, although it is hoped that it sets a standard of 'best practice' in terms of responsible actions on the part of EiCs and publishers.

Guidance

1. COPE believes that the sharing of information between EiCs is a necessary part of fulfilling their obligation to prevent and respond to suspected research misconduct. Further, there is no difference between sharing information about a submitted (but as yet unpublished) manuscript and a published article, other than the fact that data in the latter are in the public domain.
2. The use of email is an appropriate way of communicating such information, given the practical difficulties of face-to-face and telephone conversations between EiCs in different time zones.

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3. COPE accepts that there is a conflict between priorities to: i) pursue suspected misconduct in order to defend the integrity of the scientific record; and ii) encourage confidentiality on the part of editors and publishers. COPE therefore believes that any sharing of information should be based on the principle of minimising the harm whilst maximising the benefit:
 - a. Steps taken to minimise harm include:
 - i. alerting authors by including information in the Guidance for Authors that material will be handled in confidence except for the purposes of review AND in order to investigate possible misconduct.
 - ii. making initial enquiries in suspected cases, according to COPE guidance/flowcharts, without the sharing of information (unless there is an indication of an issue beyond just one journal). Thus information should only be shared if there is no response, the response is inadequate, or more than one journal is thought to be affected.
 - iii. restricting the information shared to factual content only.
 - iv. limiting the amount of information shared to the minimum required, e.g. not including personal contact details or other information that is not crucial to other EiCs.
 - v. limiting the circulation list to the minimum required.
 - vi. adding the word 'confidential' to the subject of emails, and including a rider/disclaimer to the text to the effect that such communication should be treated as such, and not forwarded beyond the initial circulation list without permission; further, that it does not indicate a judgement of wrongdoing, but is merely intended to alert EiCs in case they have other information that might assist the handling of this case – including to exonerate the investigator/author in question.
 - b. Steps taken to maximise benefit include:
 - i. an undertaking to pursue all cases of suspected misconduct according to COPE guidelines/flowcharts.
 - ii. inclusion of the appropriate EiCs if multiple journals are affected.

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References

1. [http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/\(ISSN\)1365-2044/homepage/-_research_misconduct.htm](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/(ISSN)1365-2044/homepage/-_research_misconduct.htm)
– a list of links to both general discussions of the issues and specific items about the Boldt and Fujii cases, in which collaboration between EiCs led to the publication of joint EiC letters that were central to the resolution of the cases.
2. [http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/store/10.1111/\(ISSN\)1365-2044/asset/homepages/Joint_Editorial_Statement__12_Mar_2011.pdf?v=1&s=5da1949225bce7beb97c395ab572d64279d84a31&isAguD oi=false](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/store/10.1111/(ISSN)1365-2044/asset/homepages/Joint_Editorial_Statement__12_Mar_2011.pdf?v=1&s=5da1949225bce7beb97c395ab572d64279d84a31&isAguD oi=false) and
[http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/store/10.1111/\(ISSN\)1365-2044/asset/homepages/Fujii_Joint_EiC_letter_to_institutions_April_9.pdf?v=1&s=314f66742edb10d5399ab2e31712de1aaefc15f8&isAguD oi=false](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/store/10.1111/(ISSN)1365-2044/asset/homepages/Fujii_Joint_EiC_letter_to_institutions_April_9.pdf?v=1&s=314f66742edb10d5399ab2e31712de1aaefc15f8&isAguD oi=false)
– the joint EiC letters referred to above.
3. COPE. Code of conduct and best practice guidelines for journal editors.
http://publicationethics.org/files/Code_of_conduct_for_journal_editors_1.pdf.

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