

Responding to anonymous whistle blowers: COPE Discussion Document

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This paper aims to stimulate discussion about how editors should respond to emails from whistle blowers. 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 the Operations Manager at <http://publicationethics.org/contact-us>

Background

Anonymous whistle blowing is not a new phenomenon. There are many legitimate reasons for individuals to wish to remain anonymous including fear of a loss of position (especially for more junior participants in a research or clinical project) should their name come to light. More recently, however, a new phenomenon has arisen – that of individuals using the anonymity provided by the web to provide tip offs on a range of issues relating to publication ethics. This document suggests how editors should respond. We welcome feedback on it. We may post the responses on our website and may revise the document in response.

Request for guidance from COPE

There are now many hundreds or possibly even thousands of anonymous email requests that have been sent to editors insisting that they investigate a case of alleged plagiarism within their journal, which usually are claimed to have been detected via the use of anti-plagiarism software. Other emails have alleged figure manipulation. The pattern of the cases is not clear; they range across many different types of journals and publishers; cases may be very old or more recent. Whistle blowers may copy COPE council or staff on the emails. A link to the readout from software is sometimes provided; often information is only provided for abstracts. COPE has been asked to provide guidance for journal editors on how to handle these cases.

Questions that have arisen include:

Q: Do we need to take this request seriously?

COPE response: *Generally, yes – all allegations of plagiarism or other publication misconduct that have specific, detailed evidence to support the claim should be investigated. Editors should acknowledge receipt and then investigate according to the appropriate COPE flowchart or guidance and should also follow their own publisher's guidance.*

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Q: The plagiarized article in question seems to be only a conference abstract - is this plagiarism?

COPE response: *probably not – provided the journal article references the abstract appropriately (usually a conference abstract is simply an earlier version of work presented in the journal article).*

Q: The plagiarism claimed only occurs in the abstract of the published article- is this plagiarism?

COPE response: *it may be. You will also need to check the full article for overlap.*

Q: The tone of the email is very aggressive/personal- how should I respond?

COPE response: *You should respond politely, indicate your intended action, and not get drawn into any personal exchanges: eg*

“Dear XX,

Thank you for getting in contact with us and drawing our attention to the concerns you have. We will investigate and take action as needed in accordance with the COPE guidelines.

Yours sincerely”

Once you have responded we suggest you do not need to correspond further.

Q: I have checked and in my opinion there is no substantial evidence of what is alleged. I have told the whistle blower this but he/she does not accept my response.

COPE response: *If you are confident, it is fine to reiterate this once and then say you consider the matter closed and not respond further.*

Q: (In relation to a recent article) I have checked and I do find evidence of plagiarism or figure manipulation - what should I do?

COPE response: *You should assess the issue and decide if a correction or retraction is warranted and follow the COPE procedures /flowchart for this.*

Q: (In relation to a very old article) I have checked and I do find evidence of plagiarism or figure manipulation - what should I do?

COPE response: *You should assess the issue and decide if a correction or retraction is warranted and follow the COPE procedures for this. This is the case even if it occurred before you became editor/publisher. However, it may be hard to contact authors of very old papers in which case you may wish to bring the case to a COPE forum to discuss.*

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Q: Does COPE respond separately to whistle blowers on emails that it is cced on?

COPE response: No – we do not respond separately to whistle blowers.

Conclusions

There are a number of anonymous whistle blowers contacting editors. Such individuals should be treated courteously and the complaint investigated appropriately, as it would be if the complaint were from another source. Beyond that there is no need to engage in extensive correspondence. If this process has been followed and there is still concern, advice of COPE can be sought.