

Ethical Editing

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Spring 2009

NEWS AND VIEWS FROM

COPE COMMITTEE ON PUBLICATION ETHICS



An ethical epidemic

In December 2008, as I roamed the airport waiting for my plane from London back to Switzerland after my first COPE meeting, I came across Malcolm Gladwell's best-selling book *The Tipping Point*. I was intrigued by his idea that products, messages, and causes spread like epidemics of contagious disease. That seemed to describe what had happened in the past year at COPE.

With an exponential number of new members, a new website, and a new Operations Director, COPE is spreading in every direction. With its new newsletter, *Ethical Editing*, COPE hopes to offer some perspective on the issues confronting today's journal editors and publishers.

For several months now I've been pondering what kind of newsletter will appeal to COPE's diverse readership. My goal as Editor of *Ethical Editing* is to produce 8 pages that other editors will actually want to read—pages that you will download from your computer and peruse on the train, or in a traffic jam, or in the bathtub. Not a collection of dry reports on mundane subjects, but a publication with personality.

Many of COPE's new members aren't quite sure what COPE has to offer them. The first issue of *Ethical Editing* is designed to address that question. It looks both inward and forward, with an emphasis on what's changing and what's new.

Each issue will be divided into departments. "The Scoop from COPE" will highlight how COPE works, and the work that COPE does. It starts off with a profile of our new Operations Director, Tim Feest. "From the Field" will focus on trends in publication ethics, pointing you to further information on the COPE website and the World Wide Web. The first topic addressed is Integrity. The next two pages are devoted to a Feature: articles, interviews, profiles, surveys, history. This issue's Feature is a Q&A that examines the need for COPE. Since there are benefits to being woken up once in a while, "Sedation Vacation" will provide a forum for discussion of hot topics, essays on controversial subjects, and provocative viewpoints. The dark side of rejection letters is examined here. And finally, "The Last Word(s)" will feature your letters, photos, quotations, original artwork and cartoons, and interesting links.

That's the starting point. I'm aiming for another tipping point. As Gladwell says: "There is a simple way to package information that, under the right circumstances, can make it irresistible. All you have to do is find it." The newsletter will keep evolving. Let me know when the message reaches you!

Jeannie

Theme: Integrity

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Masthead

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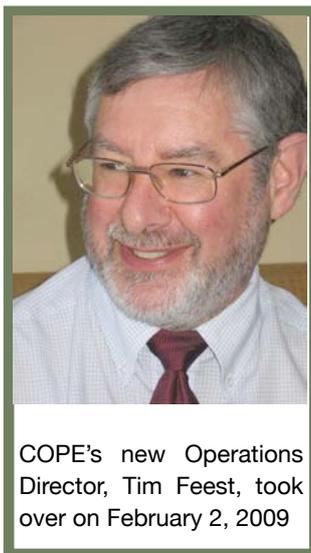
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COPE's new conductor: Operations Director Tim Feest

A Baby Boomer from the early end of the Boom (“Suffice to say, I can remember The Beatles from the first time round”), Tim Feest was born and raised in Aldershot, Hampshire, a town located about 35 miles (56 km) southwest of London, and known at the time as the “Home of the British Army.” At the age of 12 he moved with his parents to Worthing, a seaside town.

There was always music in the house when Feest was young. “One of my brothers plays the piano and church organ, and I played duets with him on both,” says Feest. “I am told that I started playing the piano at the age of three, and it remains my favorite instrument.” Music was also the focus of what Feest cites as one of his most interesting jobs: a volunteer position with the Prince’s Trust Business Programme, an organization founded by Prince Charles to provide small amounts of money and mentoring to young people trying to start their own businesses.



COPE's new Operations Director, Tim Feest, took over on February 2, 2009

ceramics to composites and, most recently, nano-materials. Typically a graduate metallurgist/materials scientist would expect to work for companies such as Rolls-Royce or British Petroleum, where there is a need for knowledge of the properties and potential uses of engineering materials. The work of materials scientists is seen “just about anywhere in modern society,” says Feest, “from table cutlery to biomaterials for implants and artificial limbs to sustainable technologies for energy generation and use.”

Feest landed his first job, in 1973, “by happy accident.” A company called IPC Science and Technology Press was looking for a trainee editor with a background in materials science or engineering, to work on specialist journals in those fields. The company “was desperate for someone to start, and luckily I met their requirements,” says Feest. By 1988 he had worked his way up through the editorial ranks to become Production Director for Butterworth Scientific, with responsibility for all

editing, production, manufacturing, and graphic design.

Twenty years later, Feest has been hired as COPE's first Operations Director. As a former editor of academic scientific, technical and medical journals, he is familiar with many of the ethical issues in which COPE is involved—“for example, duplicate publication and rejection of unsound research results, albeit in the

continued

Not just for doctors anymore: COPE member disciplines in 2009

“I had no idea we had nearly 400 arts and humanities journals, nor 286 on business and economics. At the *BMJ* we used to ask ourselves ‘what would this mean to a doctor in Bogata?’ when selecting, commissioning, and editing articles. I guess we at COPE headquarters need to bear in mind the economist in the Philippines and the historian in Brazil when we're making decisions.”

COPE Council member Trish Groves

Discipline	No. of journals
Medicine	689
Life Sciences	420
Arts & Humanities	385
Economics, Finance, Business & Industry	286
Psychology, Social & Behavioral Sciences	284
Engineering & Technology	178
Computer Science	151
Chemistry	150
Environmental Sciences	111
Education	107
Physics	105
Dentistry, Nursing, Allied Health & Veterinary Science	83
Maths & Statistics	82
Earth Science	76
Law	25
Geography	19
Astronomy, Astrophysics, Space & Planetary Science	11

The Scoop from COPE

engineering rather than biomedical fields.” Feest also has past experience running small enterprises, including for a short time his own business—a recording studio—and for the past 12 years a British organization called the Occupational Standards Council for Engineering. “In both I have been required to manage all aspects of the business, from producing strategic and operational business plans to the daily routine of dealing with correspondence and marketing and promotional activities,” he says.

That experience will quickly be put to use. COPE’s rapid expansion over the past year has created many challenges, and Feest can’t wait to start addressing them: “I already have a list of about a dozen key topics needing attention!” In his first months as COPE Operations Director (he began working on February 2, 2009), one of Feest’s main priorities will be to arrange meetings with members, to introduce himself, and to find out how COPE can provide more and better services to meet the needs of COPE’s editors and publishers.

The COPE founders were medical doctors, and until recently COPE has focused on issues facing medical journals (close to 700 belong to COPE). Yet the organization now represents a wide range of other disciplines (see the box on page 2). Asked whether the focus of the organization will change under his leadership, Feest replies: “I see the focus being broadened rather than re-directed. I suspect that many of the issues faced by editors of biomedical journals will be common to those in disciplines such as the social and economic sciences and engineering

and technology. We can all learn from each other in dealing with ethical issues.”

Feest’s goals for his first year include ensuring that COPE is equipped with the necessary systems and procedures to meet the present and future needs of its members; developing and launching new products and services, many of which are already in the development stage; and making himself—and thus COPE—better known “in the industry, and perhaps beyond, as the prime source of guidance and advice on ethical issues in journal publishing.”

Because COPE doesn’t have its own offices, Feest will continue to rent one that he already uses. “I actually prefer the process of ‘going to work,’ ” he says. In any case, working at home isn’t an option for the new Operations Director, due to lack of space. “We currently have a piano, two keyboards, four guitars, a mandolin and a drum from Nepal taking up most of the spare space in the house.”



What’s on the Web?



At the end of October 2008, COPE launched a new version of its website (www.publicationethics.org). What changed? “Everything,” says Jeremy Theobald, COPE’s Webmaster (and Treasurer). “That is an essay in itself and would take 5000 words to write. We completely redesigned and rebuilt the site from scratch.” The old site featured a contact page, a list of members, the COPE constitution, a number of cases, and a home page with announcements, says Theobald. The new site has been greatly expanded.

Anyone can view the organization’s best practice guidelines and flowcharts, the Code of Conduct, news, research grants, agendas from previous seminars, COPE’s annual reports, and the Council blog. Only members can post comments on the blog, and only members have access to the newsletter and audit, sample letters, officers’ presentations, and COPE’s planned online learning course. In addition, the new site features two large databases that can be searched by members—one containing the member journals and their editors (at present there are details for 3873 out of approximately 5500), the other with all of the cases considered at meetings of the COPE Forum. The site is accessed by several hundred unique visitors per day.

Ensuring integrity in scientific publications

What is being done to ensure that researchers act with integrity? Answers vary in the fields of medical and scientific publishing:

Identifying misconduct during the review process

In a 2008 publication in *Scientometrics*, researchers from Switzerland asked: "Do editors and referees look for signs of scientific misconduct when reviewing manuscripts?" The conclusion they reached: apparently not. Using quantitative content analysis techniques, Bornmann et al. examined 46 studies published between 1967 and 2006 which "investigated criteria used in assessing manuscripts and/or reasons for acceptance or rejection of submitted manuscripts...." The authors identified 542 criteria considered by editors and reviewers, and grouped these into nine main categories, the ninth being "ethics". Given that fewer than ¼ of the investigated studies mentioned ethics as a criterion for acceptance or rejection, and no studies referred to possible fabrication of research data, the authors concluded that " 'ethics' takes on altogether little importance in journal peer review." (Bornmann L, Nast I, Daniel HD. Do editors and referees look for signs of scientific misconduct when reviewing manuscripts? A quantitative analysis of studies that examined review criteria and reasons for accepting and rejecting manuscripts for publication. *Scientometrics* 2008;77(3): 415-432. Contact: Lutz Bornmann, bornmann@gess.ethz.ch.)

Editors and reviewers don't catch all breaches in research integrity, even when they are vigilant. A new website highlights papers reported to have involved misconduct:

Web-based listing of fraudulent scientific publications

In order to help researchers, students, editors, universities, and funding agencies identify transgressions, four PhD students in France launched Scientific Red Cards, a web site designed to "facilitate the identification of fraudulent papers in the literature." As of the end of 2008 the site listed 30 published papers known to have involved misconduct, ranging from fabrication, falsification, and plagiarism to lack of adherence to editorial policies to unethical treatment of research subjects. Spokesperson Claire Ribault said the founders hope that the website will raise awareness of the problem and provide a place "to discuss the issue of research integrity within the scientific community." (Contact: www.scientificredcards.org).

In an attempt to prevent transgressions, one country is taking steps to counter the bad publicity generated by cases of scientific misconduct uncovered within its borders:

Countrywide coalition offering advice and censure

In Austria, a group of 16 universities and scientific organizations joined on November 27, 2008, to found the Austrian Agency for Scientific Integrity (Agentur für wissenschaftliche Integrität), an association that will investigate cases of potential scientific misconduct in Austria.

The agency will not have legal or governmental power. Rather, it will provide a neutral and objective resource for individuals and institutions dealing with ethical problems. In early January 2009 the agency was busy recruiting members of its new board, which will comprise five high-profile non-Austrians representing the disciplines social sciences, life sciences, medicine, natural science/technology, and the Arts, as well as an advisory member with competence in Austrian law, all to be appointed for two-year terms. It is hoped that "the reputation the agency is going to build up will serve as a new moral standard in this field," said Stefan Bernhardt, head of Corporate and Science Communications for one of the founding organizations, the Austrian Science Fund.

(Contact: Stefan Bernhardt, Stefan.bernhardt@fwf.ac.at)

Help from students and governments doesn't change the fact that editors have a role to play in ensuring integrity. Discussing the issue can help:

Annual meeting on Integrity in Science Communication

"Sometimes science editors must be whistleblowers, sometimes science editors must be prosecutors, sometimes science editors must be judges," says Arjan Polderman, President of the European Association of Science Editors. Falsification, fabrication, and plagiarism will be addressed at EASE's Tenth General Assembly and Conference in Pisa, Italy, on September 16-19, 2009. (Details: www.ease.org.uk/con/index.shtml.)

Publication ethics and the need for COPE

COPE's outgoing Chairman, Harvey Marcovitch, Editor-in-Chief of Clinical Risk and an Associate Editor at the BMJ (British Medical Journal), and COPE's Vice Chairman, Sabine Kleinert, Senior Executive Editor at The Lancet, offer their perspectives on the ethical issues encountered by today's editors, and on COPE's role in helping journal editors cope.

Q: COPE was founded in 1997 as a sort of medical editors' discussion and support group. How has the organization changed since then?

Sabine Kleinert: The organization has changed beyond recognition, from its humble beginnings as a kind of 'self-help' group for editors to its current status as a registered charity with over 5000 international members. The initial change happened somewhat gradually, with COPE having an elected Council and Officers and a constitution when we felt that the organization had matured enough to warrant that change. The increase in membership happened exponentially over the last year or so, with big publishing houses signing up all their journals.



Q: What types of ethical problems are you seeing in biomedical and scientific publishing?

Harvey Marcovitch: These are summarized on our website; most frequent are attempted or actual duplicate (redundant) publication and alleged plagiarism. Also figuring highly are authorial problems, including disputes between co-authors over priority and 'gift' and 'ghost' authorship. We receive enquiries about possible ethical breaches in human subject research and breaches of patient confidentiality. Allegations of fabrication and fraud are fewer in number, but by no means negligible.

Q: Do other disciplines—for example, humanities or economics—have completely different types of problems?

Sabine Kleinert: We don't really know the answer to that, as we're only gradually seeing problems brought by journal editors outside the biomedical field. I suspect that the problems will be surprisingly similar.

Harvey Marcovitch: Ethical issues in experimentation (such as informed consent) differ where human subjects are not involved, as do attitudes to subject confidentiality in disciplines not governed by strict rules.

Q: What factors do you think lead authors to act unethically?

Harvey Marcovitch: In one phrase—'conflicting interests'. These might include financial reward (from the research sponsor or ownership of a potential patent right); pressure to publish in order to obtain promotion; frustration when an experiment turns out to have an unexpected result, and, in a few, sheer dishonesty.

Sabine Kleinert: Also an environment which is conducive to ethical transgressions—that is, an institutional climate of 'looking the other way'.

Q: Whose responsibility is it to report breaches of ethics?

Sabine Kleinert: Anyone who discovers or witnesses them.

Harvey Marcovitch: In general this is a moral responsibility. It can also be a regulatory responsibility, or a legal one.

Q: Do you think high-impact journals encounter more ethical problems than the main run of journals?

Sabine Kleinert: I don't think there are any data showing that high-impact journals encounter more or fewer ethical problems in terms of prevalence. The sheer number of submissions—about 8000 per year at *The Lancet*, for example—of course makes it more likely that the actual number is higher.

continued

Feature Article

Q: How much time and effort would you estimate a journal invests in following up on ethical problems?

Sabine Kleinert: At *The Lancet* we discuss all difficult cases (and we have usually 5-8 on the go at any given time) at a weekly meeting, but the individual editors who are handling these cases will spend much more time in writing letters/e-mails, contacting the relevant people.

Harvey Marcovitch: As an editor I found that handling a potential misconduct case could use up as much time as handling 50 straightforward papers.

Q: Do journals with full-time employees have more resources to devote to potential breaches of conduct than journals whose editors are primarily volunteers?

Sabine Kleinert: Yes, and it can be very difficult for small specialist journals to devote sufficient time to deal with breaches in publication and research ethics.

Harvey Marcovitch: Because significant breaches are relatively uncommon, there is a learning curve effect, such that the more papers handled, the better an editor becomes at picking up problems. And wealthy journals may be able to afford technological aids, such as software to detect plagiarism and image manipulation.

Q: Does addressing ethical issues really matter, since science is “self-correcting” given time?

Sabine Kleinert: It does matter—especially in biomedical and clinical research, where patients may undergo treatment in the meantime, or take part in further research studies unnecessarily. Funds may be used unnecessarily. The so-called self-correction may also take a very long time.

Q: Should journals impose sanctions on wrongdoers—for example, a moratorium on accepting their papers?

Sabine Kleinert: I find the concept of official sanctions a really difficult one, and I wouldn't recommend it. However, in practice, we do remember authors in whom we have lost trust, and we would

look at any subsequent submissions with that knowledge in mind.

Q: How do media reports of ethical breaches affect the involved journals and their industries?

Harvey Marcovitch: I doubt that individual journals are unduly damaged—unless they are found to have a pattern of unreliability. Publishing companies' fear of damage to their brand image may play a part in their support for COPE. University departments' reputations can certainly be damaged, such that a cynical observer could conclude they might be tempted to sweep problems 'under the carpet.' Pharmaceutical companies can certainly find their shareholders' revenue harmed by major scandals involving data manipulation exposure.

Q: How can COPE better ensure that institutions take all aspects of misconduct, including reviewer misconduct, more seriously?

Harvey Marcovitch:

The major publishing houses which have signed up to COPE are using our templates to influence their editors to be alert to problems, including not letting institutions off the hook. Publishers can also provide their own on-line systems for marking and managing suspected misconduct, partly through links to COPE flowcharts. And they can help organize and encourage attendance at meetings on how to handle these issues. COPE is sponsoring such a meeting in March 2009.



Q: Why should journals combat ethical problems?

Harvey Marcovitch: Research and publication relies heavily on trust. Breach of that trust calls into question the validity of all work—not just that conducted by those whose misconduct is revealed. Some science is 'self-correcting'—that is, subsequent studies negate those with unreliable results—but this cannot be relied upon to prevent falsehood being perpetuated. Journals are at the end of the food chain as far as research is concerned, so editors are the last possible defenders of integrity.

Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde: The dark side of rejection

There once was a journal editor named Henry Jekyll. Like most journal editors, he strove to make rejection as painless as possible for authors. Dr Jekyll wrote polite, empathetic letters conveying regret over his inability to publish the submitted manuscripts, suggesting that rejection was more a function of the limited space in the journal than of the quality of the manuscript, and offering the hope that future publication might be possible.

Dr Jekyll's rejection template is appended below:

Dear Dr Xxxx:

Thank you for submitting your manuscript "xxxx" to *The Euphemist* for consideration. Based on the reviewers' comments and my own evaluation, I regret that we will not be able to publish your manuscript.

[Insert details about why the manuscript was rejected.]

The reviewers' comments are appended below. I hope that you find them both constructive and informative. If you elect to submit your paper elsewhere, I hope that you will be able to profit from the enclosed reviews.

Thank you again for submitting your work to *The Euphemist* for consideration. I am sorry that we are unable to accept your submission for publication. Nevertheless, I appreciate the privilege of reviewing your manuscript. I look forward to receiving future submissions from you and your group.

Dr Henry Jekyll
Editor-in-Chief
The Euphemist

One day, Henry Jekyll awoke at his desk to discover that something terrible had occurred while he was napping. In the Sent Messages folder on his computer he discovered the following mail:

Dear Dr Nada:

You recently submitted your manuscript "Validation of a model for prediction of mortality in tie-wearing males" to *The Euphemist* for consideration. It was tough finding someone to agree to review it, but finally I located two experts whose students weren't too busy, and they took on

the job as a special favor to me. Based on their rather superficial comments and the two minutes I took to skim through your paper, I'm very sorry to give you the bad news that you've been rejected (and probably not for the first time).

It's rather hard to believe that someone wanted to study this subject, which I find incredibly boring. It's even harder to believe that several of you actually took the time to write a paper. I guess you must have had a lot of bad weather this year.

The reviewers' comments are appended below. They aren't the greatest reviews I've ever sent out, but they're at least a lot longer than the ones that would have been written by the experts themselves.

I hope that you didn't find our review process too demoralizing. You can at least take comfort in the fact that we reject almost everyone.

Thank you again for submitting your manuscript to our journal. I look forward to rejecting future submissions from you and your group.

Mr Edward Hyde
Acting Editor-in-Chief
The Euphemist

Alas for Henry Jekyll, it was too late to recall the sent message, which Dr Nada posted on his blog. In a matter of hours Mr Hyde's letter had prompted countless postings by rejected authors who had always suspected that there was more to their rejection than met the eye.

Soon afterward, *The Euphemist's* publisher printed an apology to all rejected authors. Dr Nada hung the letter beside his paper's 8 rejections and approached submission with renewed vigor. "Validation of a model for prediction of mortality in tie-wearing males" was the most frequently cited article the following year.

Meanwhile, Henry Jekyll relocated to a deserted island with no Internet access and took up underwater basket-weaving, which he found much more relaxing than being an editor.

Moral of the story: Don't fall asleep at your computer unless you want to learn how to weave.

The Last Word(s)

At the Forum on March 3, 2009

COPE members can read complete summaries of cases at www.publicationethics.org

COPE Secretary Liz Wager (l) and Vice-Chair Sabine Kleinert preside



Pritpal Tamber presents case 08-28 (above)



COPE member Waseem Alladin asks for clarification about a case (above)

COPE Case 09-01
“Is COPE a P.O. box for complaints, or is COPE going to be something with teeth?”

COPE Case 09-02
“It’s like a sort of painful divorce. The two parties can’t speak to one another.”

COPE Case 09-04
“The author suggested referees, one of whom turned out to be his wife....He has a postal address, but it turns out not to be one you can deliver post to.”



Afterwords

Readers, this is your spot to voice your opinions on topics you read about in *Ethical Editing*, or on matters related to editing and ethics in general. Do you agree with the views that were shared in these pages? Can you offer advice based on your own experience? Would you like to share an idea, offer a suggestion, provide a photo? Let us hear from you! *Ethical Editing* is a member benefit, and we want it to meet your needs. Send comments and contributions to:

cope_editor@publicationethics.org

Words from the wise

“Our character... is an omen of our destiny, and the more integrity we have and keep, the simpler and nobler that destiny is likely to be.”

George Santayana, US (Spanish-born) philosopher (1863 - 1952)

Last laugh

by Annemarie Glaser



Unfortunately for Harold, someone *had* noticed.



Worth a 1000 words

COPE is an example of author Malcolm Gladwell’s theory that “little things can make a big difference.” With its membership increasing from 450 journals to more than 5000 in 2008, the Committee on Publication Ethics has reached “The Tipping Point”. Now, with the delivery of the first issue of our new quarterly newsletter, *Ethical Editing*, we have another forum for discussion of ethical issues. We’re counting on you to help the message spread!