

Discussion/guidance document on handling competing interests

This guidance has been drafted following a COPE Discussion Forum (9 December 2015, <http://publicationethics.org/resources/discussion-documents>). The aim of this document is to further encourage discussion and to capture a record of the issues around competing interests — especially when they arise after publication — to help inform and progress the debate, and to firm up guidance where that is indicated. COPE welcomes feedback on this document and we encourage journal editors, publishers and others interested to comment. Please email all comments to Natalie Ridgeway, COPE Executive Officer at <http://publicationethics.org/contact-us>

Introduction

Competing interests (also known as conflicts of interests — COIs) are ubiquitous. One definition is as follows:

“A conflict of interest (COI) is a situation in which a person or organization is involved in multiple interests, financial interest, or otherwise, one of which could possibly corrupt the motivation of the individual or organization. The presence of a conflict of interest is independent of the occurrence of impropriety.”¹

Publishers have interpreted CIs in a number of ways: one example is from the PLOS journals² ***“A competing interest is anything that interferes with, or could reasonably be perceived as interfering with, the full and objective presentation, peer review, editorial decision-making, or publication of research or non-research articles submitted to a journal. Competing interests can be financial or non-financial, professional, or personal. Competing interests can arise in relationship to an organization or another person.”*** The Wiley definition is noted here³.

Reference
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Approved by COPE Council
December 2015
Version 1
Published: 26 January 2016

It is also useful to note that competing interests may arise in the conduct of research itself, and in the context of publishing are thus not restricted to the presentation, peer review, decision making, or publication of articles in journals.

These generally understood principles are shared by many journals and publishers. Their interpretation into policy, however, varies (for example, journals ask for a variety of levels of disclosure for financial competing interests).

Issues that have arisen

Competing interests are a regular topic at the **COPE forum**⁴. In particular, we have seen a number of cases recently in which competing interests have come to light after publication and where editors have been unwilling, or uncertain of the process, to issue a correction.

This discussion document lays out the policy again, and clarifies processes for handling competing interests, especially if they arise after publication. In particular, it is worth noting that correcting the record in this way should be regarded as a positive step by a journal.

Clarification of policy

COPE's **Code of Conduct for Journal Editors**⁵, item 17, clearly states that ***“Editors should have systems for managing their own conflicts of interest as well as those of their staff, authors, reviewers and editorial board members”***. The intention of the policy is in line with increasing moves across all of scholarly publishing to increase transparency for all aspects of reporting. In addition, it has a specific aim in the context of publication ethics since competing interests can threaten the integrity of the work being reported.

Practical issues for handling competing interests

1. Ideally, issues relating to competing interests should be handled before publication ie during the review process of the journal. Hence, first most importantly, journals and publishers should have a clear process in place, that it is clearly and regularly articulated to authors, reviewers, editors and journal staff.
2. Declarations of competing interests should ideally be a separate step in the submission or review process, with clear explanations and examples.
3. The competing interest policy should be appropriately managed. This is most appropriately done by senior staff at the journal and/or publisher.
4. Competing interests should be clearly and consistently indicated on all published papers with, if necessary, links to further details.
5. Journals and publishers should have a process in place for handling the reporting of competing interests that come to light during the publication process—for example from reviewers. The process is laid out in the **flowchart: What to do if a reviewer suspects undisclosed conflict of interest (Col) in a submitted manuscript**⁶.
6. Journals and publishers should have a process in place for handling the reporting of competing interests that come to light after publication. The process is laid out in this **flowchart: What to do if a reader suspects undisclosed conflict of interest (Col) in a published article**⁶. On occasion, these reports may come from anonymous individuals, for which guidelines are available in the **COPE Discussion Document: Responding to anonymous whistle blowers**⁷ and **COPE Discussion Document: Addressing ethics complaints from complainants who submit multiple issues**⁸.
7. It is most important that when a previously undeclared competing interest has been found, the journal ensures it is appropriately documented on the published manuscript, with linking to the version of record. For example, a letter to the editor simply noting the conflict of interest, either from the author or another individual, is not sufficient. Appropriate documentation might include a correction permanently linked to the version of record. An expression of concern or a retraction, which also permanently link to the version of record, may be required if a thorough investigation by the journal and/or appropriate institutional body revealed that, as a result of the competing interest, the paper's findings or conclusions had been compromised to the extent that they were unreliable.
8. When a previously undeclared competing interest comes to light journals may wish to review and if necessary make their policy stronger or clearer.
9. Editors should declare their own competing interests when they publish in their own journal.
10. In-kind support, such as administrative assistance, literature searching support, medical writing support or providing a reagent, should be disclosed, in simple detail, to provide transparency even if it is not in itself a competing interest.

Examples of competing interests that should lead to a correction of a paper

- Financial payment to authors, e.g., payment to conduct a clinical trial, which was alleged after publication by an anonymous email, and subsequently confirmed following an investigation by the editors
- Close professional or personal relationship of author and editor that comes to light after publication, e.g., the author was a PhD student 3 years previously in the editor's laboratory
- A patent application for a device which was the subject of the paper that was applied for and granted during the time a paper was being peer reviewed but not declared to the editors.

We encourage feedback on this consultation document, in particular if there are practical obstacles that journals or publishers have encountered in handling competing interests.

References

1. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conflict_of_interest
2. <http://journals.plos.org/plosone/s/competing-interests>
3. <http://exchanges.wiley.com/ethicsguidelines#subSection6.7>
4. [http://publicationethics.org/cases/?f\[0\]=im_field_classifications:728](http://publicationethics.org/cases/?f[0]=im_field_classifications:728)
5. http://publicationethics.org/files/Code%20of%20Conduct_2.pdf
6. <http://publicationethics.org/resources/flowcharts>
7. http://publicationethics.org/files/u7141/whistle%20blowers_0_0.pdf
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