

How should a journal deal with persistent complainers?

Background

Every so often a journal may get not one, but a series of complaints from the same source. These complaints may be directed at an author, an editor, or the journal in general. If these complaints turn out to be well founded, obviously there is a serious problem with the publication. However, we are aware of cases where a complainant continuously comes up with cases that turn out to be baseless. Some complaints deal with matters outside the remit of the journal: for example, in one case an editor was accused of blocking a promotion; in another case, several journals received weekly (plagiarism) allegations against papers published by an editor-in-chief apparently because the complainant was not content with the outcome of an earlier unrelated investigation conducted by the editor-in-chief.

Other complaints are about publications. We have seen one complaint that alleges plagiarism, but evidence presented consisted only of common English phrases like "...has been proven to", "In previous research, we observed that...". There are also authors that insist repeatedly on a journal publishing comments to earlier comments, and do not accept that a certain topic has been closed.

In other cases, complainants accuse articles with similar titles of plagiarism whereas the content turns out to be entirely different. Finally, we receive complaints from researchers who insist that their work should have been cited, "as it is so important".

When the above happens on an incidental basis, editors can deal with such cases by following the standard procedure. However, how should they act when the complaints do not stop, get personal, and start humming around the community?

Questions

- How prevalent is this situation?
- What are legitimate options to deal with such cases?
- Should one escalate to higher authorities (lawyers, employing institutes)?
- How to repair any reputational damage incurred by unfounded accusations?
- Is there any way to prevent such cases (for example, through stated policy)?
- Should editors react to messages posted on blogs and forums?
- What is the role of publishers to investigate journals who receive such issues?

The topic was discussed at the COPE Forum on 4 December 2013.

COMMENTS FROM THE FORUM (4 December 2013) – NOTE, Comments do not imply formal COPE advice, or consensus.

- Publishers are in a different position to editors and are often able to see trends that are emerging overall in different issues.
- In response to a poll asking if the Forum audience had come across persistent complainers at their journal or publishing organisation, about a third said they had come across this problem.
- Most editors who came across the problem dealt with it themselves but most did inform their publisher, especially if there were legal threats.
- Very few publishers seem to provide guidelines to their editors on this issue but most editors would find guidance on this useful.
- Legitimate complainants or whistleblowers should not be impeded from making complaints. We need to ensure that their legitimate concerns are heard and acted upon.
- Serial complainants with untrue or misleading comments make it harder for legitimate whistleblowers to get heard, and potentially make it more difficult for editors to deal with the other issues involved in running a journal because of the time constraints and also the general anxiety that these complaints create. These types of complaints are very time consuming.
- Is there a role for COPE in dealing with persistent and groundless complainers? A checklist of actions and points which can be shared with the complainer might be useful and would show the complainant that they are being heard.
- Should journals and publishers have statements on their website emphasizing the independence of staff and editors, and a policy on threatening behaviour?
- After a certain time, breaking off all communication maybe the only way to deal with persistent and groundless complainers. This can be made clear to the individual that this is the course of action you plan to take. The editor should then stick to it.
- Editors should remain professional at all times in dealing with complainants.
- Should there be guidance on journal or publisher websites educating disgruntled authors about what to do in cases of plagiarism, for example. Many authors do not know what to do or where to go with a complaint.
- Some guidance is already available on the COPE website in the form of the COPE guidelines on anonymous whistleblowers. Although many of the individuals who complain in this way tend not to be anonymous, there is some overlap here—some of the issues can be the same.

In summary, the forum thought this was a very interesting topic and one where both journals and publishers would welcome further advice.

Action: COPE will convene a group from council and any interested members to draft an initial document to provide advice and guidance to editors and publishers on this issue.

COMMENTS POSTED ON THE WEBSITE

Posted by Julie Browne, 28/11/2013

I am aware of one incident where an author approached the (female) office staff at a conference. He was unhappy with the recent rejection of his paper and accused the editor of racism. He actually threatened physical violence. Fortunately the editor wasn't present and the staff calmed him down, but the author subsequently started to contact the office staff in inappropriate ways (e.g. sending over-familiar emails and personal invitations). We wrote to ask him to stop. When another email arrived, announcing his intention to visit the office, the editor wrote to his institution to explain that this behaviour was unprofessional and requesting an investigation. The institution wrote back, almost by return, to say that they were taking action. We never found out

Posted by Chris Graf, 29/11/2013

First, it's worth stating that I don't want to suggest ideas that would impede legitimate complainants from making complaints, or whistle-blowers from blowing their whistles. In fact quite the opposite: I'd like to help them ensure that their legitimate concerns are heard and acted upon. A practical suggestion would be for journals and publishers to make it clear how best to structure and submit a legitimate complaint. A checklist to submit to journals or publishers along with complaints might help. A checklist like this would be most useful if it was written by an independent body, like COPE.

With that said, I think serial complainants with untrue and misleading comments undermine their own credibility. As do those with poorly researched and poorly substantiated complaints or a personal agenda. I think the more frequently that serial complainants submit equally poor complaints, the less impact they are likely to have. They cry wolf [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cry_Wolf].

I think serial complainants with untrue or misleading comments also make it harder for legitimate whistle-blowers. I think they make it harder for the people listening to and acting upon complaints to give attention to serious and legitimate issues, either by using up their limited time, or by creating confusing noise from amongst which it is harder to listen for and to hear legitimate complaints.

I'd suggest that serial complainants with poorly researched and poorly substantiated comments do more harm than good. Even those who have the best intentions, who have a mission to raise awareness around an important issue, or who have the aim of teaching 'best practice' by illustrating its opposite.

For these reasons I'd argue that it's entirely legitimate to opt not to respond to poorly researched and poorly substantiated complaints, including (and perhaps especially) those from serial complainants.

But I'd also argue that opting not to respond to this kind of complainant is not the same as ignoring their comments. The comments themselves may need action, whether or not the complainant is sent a reply. I think listening to and understanding comments can give clues for journals and publishers who wish to build and maintain a good reputation.

[The thoughts I have written above are my own. I am Treasurer of COPE, and I am employed by Wiley].

Posted by Chris Leonard, 4/12/2013

I would heartily support the idea of an independent body, such as COPE, dealing with persistent and groundless complainers. Maybe as Chris Graf suggests, a publicly-available checklist of actions and points (which can be shared with the complainer) would be a good start.

A more final and official solution maybe to discuss the case at COPE forum and make the findings and comments publicly available again (maybe even including names if it get this far). From that point on, not replying to emails is an option. Harder to ignore phone calls and personal visits though. However if we could point to some kind of official ruling on the subject, then our actions are somewhat legitimised.

When it comes to phone calls, text messages, social media intrusion and personal visits, then it can overstep the mark quite rapidly. It may be an idea to have a staff/editor charter on the website, saying that we protect the safety and independence of our staff and editors and anyone who threatens staff or external editors in any way, will have their details passed on to their institution and in extreme cases, the police. Refer to this wording at the first hint of something escalating and hopefully it will cool down the situation.

A similar policy on persistent complainants could state that legitimate concerns will be shared with COPE, but several complaints which are over-stated, wrong, or petty will result in a break of communication with the complainant?