Systematic manipulation of the publication process is where an individual or a group of individuals have repeatedly used dishonest or fraudulent practices to:

- prevent or inappropriately influence the independent assessment of a piece of scholarly work by an independent peer.
- inappropriately attribute authorship of a piece of scholarly work.
- publish fabricated or plagiarised research.

Systematic manipulation is conducted with the goal of influencing the publication record and/or achieving financial gain, and involves more than one manuscript and possibly more than one journal.

Systematic manipulation of the publication process may raise concerns at different levels:

- **Peer review manipulation.** This type of manipulation can occur directly by manipulation or hacking of the submission system of the journal. It can also occur when authors are able to suggest peer reviewers and input contact email addresses for these peer reviewers on the submission system of the journal. The authors may suggest fabricated names or names of real experts, but the contact email addresses are falsified so that all correspondence with the suggested peer reviewers is directed back to the authors. The manipulators then submit positive peer review reports to ensure the manuscript is accepted for publication.

- **Authorship for sale/papermills.** Another possibility is initially inserting the name of an accomplished guest author, especially for single-blind and open review, and then replacing the name during revision or after editorial acceptance.

- **Substitution of a manuscript.** Sometimes a high-quality manuscript is initially submitted (to ensure it passes peer review) and then a similar, but poorer quality manuscript (the authors' own manuscript) is substituted after editorial acceptance.

**Definition of Systematic Manipulation of the Publication Process**

This type of manipulation may be carried out by a group of individuals who agree to act as false peer reviewers for each other's manuscripts, thereby guaranteeing favourable peer review reports and boosting the publication records of the group. Third-party editing agencies may carry out this type of manipulation by suggesting peer reviewers on the authors’ behalf for a fee, providing false contact email addresses that result initially in acceptance for publication (although manuscripts may be rejected if peer reviewers then also suspect false email addresses). The manipulators can charge a fee.

**Note:** Peer review manipulation may occur in isolation and be instigated by authors on a small scale, for example, if a group of individuals are trying to boost their own publication records. Authorship for sale is likely to be accompanied by peer review manipulation because claiming a fee from the authors is dependent on acceptance for publication.
How to Investigate and Prevent Further Publication Manipulation

On discovering a suspicious pattern, the first considerations would be:

- To determine the cause of the problem – is it the authors, is it the reviewers?
  - Search for other submissions and publications by the same authors.
  - Check the peer reviewers of the suspicious manuscripts and published articles.
  - Check the email addresses of peer reviewers of suspicious manuscripts and articles.
  - Check whether there have been requests to change authorship or make major revisions after editorial acceptance.
- To determine whether there is a weakness in your submission process or manuscript handling system that can be addressed to prevent further manipulation.

Further investigation might include:

- Searching for computer IP addresses to determine whether all manuscripts were submitted via the same location.
- Cross-publisher pattern checking via the COPE Publishers’ Forum.
- Seeking advice from COPE.
- Using technology, such as adding flags to manuscripts or running searches on suspicious names or emails across all journals might make patterns become apparent.
- Providing information and training for editors to raise awareness of the types of manipulation that are occurring and what to look out for would be useful.

COPE Publishers’ Forum

The COPE Publishers’ Forum is already used by publisher members of COPE to seek advice on unusual cases. It provides a confidential means of sharing information, such as patterns of behaviour, about publication process manipulation with other publishers to allow them to look for similar patterns in their systems. Over time, these shared patterns and findings could develop into a resource that all members could use to help with their investigations into suspicious activities.
(a) Suspected systematic manipulation of the publication process concerning submitted manuscripts.

*Please check COPE’s ‘Systematic manipulation of the publication process document’ for definitions of systematic manipulation and information on how to spot, investigate and prevent it.

**COPE encourages its publisher members to share their findings on the COPE Publishers’ Forum.

***If you suspect peer review manipulation see flowchart ‘What to do if you suspect peer review manipulation’.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU SUSPECT SYSTEMATIC MANIPULATION OF THE PUBLICATION PROCESS

Before Publication

SUSPEND PEER REVIEW PROCESS IF SUSPICION IS RAISED IN A PUBLISHED MANUSCRIPT FOR SYSTEMATIC MANIPULATION OF THE PUBLICATION PROCESS*

Get full documentary evidence and try to elucidate if there is clear evidence of systematic publication process manipulation (e.g., share patterns of findings with other publishers via COPE**

Is there clear evidence of systematic manipulation?

Probably not

Probably

Contact the corresponding author, and co-authors if possible, with evidence and concerns requesting an explanation

Response

Satisfactory response

Authors admit manipulation

No response or inconclusive reply

Consider seeking help from the authors’ institutions

Yes the institutions might be able to investigate

Contact authors’ institutions requesting an investigation, and inform authors

Write to all authors and their institutions, explaining position and expected future behaviour

Yes misconduct confirmed

Satisfactory explanation

No response or inconclusive reply

CONSIDER IF FURTHER ACTION IS NEEDED (E.G., ORGANISING FURTHER REVIEW, PROVIDING CLEARER GUIDANCE FOR AUTHORS OR UPDATING POLICIES)

REJECT MANUSCRIPTS**

Inform authors and institutions of the decision to reject

CONSIDER CONTACTING THE INSTITUTIONS EVERY 3 MONTHS. IF NO RESPONSE 1 YEAR AFTER FIRST CONTACT, REJECT AFFECTED MANUSCRIPTS AND INFORM AUTHORS AND INSTITUTIONS**

If you suspect peer review manipulation see flowchart ‘What to do if you suspect peer review manipulation’.

**COPE encourages its publisher members to share their findings on the COPE Publishers’ Forum.

***If you suspect peer review manipulation see flowchart ‘What to do if you suspect peer review manipulation’.
(b) Suspected systematic manipulation of the publication process concerning published manuscripts.

After Publication

**WHAT TO DO IF YOU SUSPECT SYSTEMATIC MANIPULATION OF THE PUBLICATION PROCESS**

- **Suspected systematic manipulation of the publication process concerning published manuscripts.**

- **SUSPICION IS RAISED IN A PUBLISHED MANUSCRIPT FOR SYSTEMATIC MANIPULATION OF THE PUBLICATION PROCESS**

  - Get full documentary evidence and try to elucidate if there is clear evidence of systematic publication process manipulation (e.g., share patterns of findings with other publishers via COPE**

- **Contact the corresponding author, and co-authors if possible, with evidence and concerns requesting an explanation.**

- **Contact authors’ institutions requesting an investigation, and inform authors.**

- **Consider seeking help from the authors’ institutions.**

- **Inform authors and institutions of the decision to retract and retraction wording.**

- **Consider if further action is needed (e.g., organising further review, providing clearer guidance for authors or updating policies).**

- **Retract articles**

- **Consider publishing an expression of concern.**

- **Follow existing COPE guidelines**

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**Please check COPE’s "Systematic manipulation of the publication process document" for definitions of systematic manipulation and information on how to spot, investigate and prevent it.**

**COPE encourages its publisher members to share their findings on the COPE Publishers’ Forum.**

**If you suspect peer review manipulation see flowchart "What to do if you suspect peer review manipulation".**

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**Consider if further action is needed (e.g., organising further review, providing clearer guidance for authors or updating policies).**

- **Probably not systematic**

- **Follow existing COPE guidelines.**

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**Inform authors and institutions of the decision to retract and retraction wording.**

- **Yes misconduct confirmed**

- **Yes satisfactorily explained**

- **No response or inconclusive reply**

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**Consider contacting the institutions every 3 months**

- **Yes probably**

- **No**

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**Consider whether, without institutional help, the articles’ integrity remains intact.**