

Electronic Responses to Blogs and Journal Articles: a new challenge for editors

Many journals now have places where readers can post electronic responses to articles or blogs. Such electronic responses present new challenges for editors.

A member journal contacted us recently as they felt they had been the target of a concerted "attack" by the proponents of one particular viewpoint.

We discussed at the Forum (18 June 2012) whether there are currently appropriate guidelines on the publication ethics for such situations.

- Are journals obliged to post all responses, even if there are many that are essentially identical?
- How should journals decide on whether the language used in such posts is appropriate?
- If not, how should they decide on which ones to post?
- Should journals respond themselves in comments?
- Additionally, do you think blog posts "count" as previous publication (apparently Science now considers them as such)?

COMMENTS FROM THE FORUM (18 JUNE 2012)

- Many posts are very similar and are essentially identical. It is not necessary to publish all of these. The language used in posts should be relevant and scholarly, and should not be inflammatory, racist, sexist, or otherwise inappropriate.
- Moderation of blogs/electronic responses to articles by editors or editorial staff is acceptable. However, very few journals have guidelines on how to moderate online comments.
- Journal editors can respond to blogs, whether or not they are anonymous. Editors should set an example and put their name to blogs.
- Editors should not be intimidated by aggressive postings and they should not let them influence editorial policy or practice.

Action: Agreed COPE should provide guidance on how journal editors should manage online responses and blogs.

COMMENTS POSTED ON THE WEBSITE

- **Posted on 11/6/2012**

Notoriously, some journals like Journal of Affective Disorders have policies of accepting no letters to the editor under any circumstances. Other journals like Journal of Clinical Oncology have policies of not publishing letters about articles if the authors of the articles do not want to respond. Blogs are a reasonable way of overcoming such censorship and refusal to take responsibility for bad decisions or editorial shortcoming.

I think that this larger context needs to be acknowledged.

- **Posted on 12/6/2012**

I would suggest a similar stance as letter to an editor ie must be received within a certain time frame, must not be libellous, must be written in comprehensible English, journals could respond and yes this could be considered to be previous publication. Margaret Rees

- **Posted on 12/6/2012**

There is discussion on the Internet about a "code of conduct" or a "code of ethics" for blogs and bloggers. A lot of the emphasis is on transparency, no matter what the format of the blog is. Below is a link to a draft of a code of ethics that includes both a "civility enforced" approach and an "anything goes" approach. It seems to me that publishers have to develop their own codes, post them, then follow them. To me, this is a whole new job for someone in the journal office. If COPE is going to offer guidance about this topic, then I would be more in favor of the "civility" approach, which means that the journals must take responsibility for what is on their blogs. The link below has some good general guidelines about how to do this. Charon Pierson

<http://radar.oreilly.com/archives/2007/04/draft-bloggers-1.html>

- **Posted on 12/6/2012**

I am in favor of COPE developing some ethical guidelines for Blogs in journals. I have seen some entries that pushed the limits of publication ethics and suspect that other editors would welcome established guidelines.

- **Posted on 12/6/2012**

Online letters, e-letters, rapid responses, comments... call them what you will. They are a great opportunity for readers to interact with journals, but they do have the potential to be hijacked by lobby groups (or worse) and as such I think the journal has a responsibility to strictly moderate what is posted, or risk adverse consequences for researchers who are singled out for criticism in this way. I think such moderation is entirely reasonable so long as the journal clearly sets out the conditions on which is it prepared to post responses; this can include editorial discretion about appropriate language.

The BMJ's conditions are set out here: <http://www.bmj.com/about-bmj/resources-readers/responding-articles> and are a great model I think.

And finally, yes - I do think they should count as previous publications. Zoe Mullan

- **Posted on 13/6/2012**

There are many good points above. I think COPE does have a role to play here in developing some guidelines. Not sure 'blog' is the right term to use as it is usually used to describe something which is more personal and anecdotal. In the context of journal publishing, I think many above have suggested that in effect what we're talking about are 'letters to the editor' or perhaps the online version that the Guardian developed through 'Comment is Free' under their guidelines 'community standards and participation guidelines' see:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/community-standards> Perhaps this is a type of model that would

work best in H/SS? We might have to have slightly different guidelines for varying disciplines (I don't think it's possible, but welcome being proven wrong, to develop a 'one size fits all' for this purpose).

I'm not quite sure the notion of 'previous publication' will work generically across all types of journals. This, I'm sure, makes perfect sense for bio-medical and science journals, but perhaps not so much so with H/SS? If by 'previous publication' you're meaning that whatever someone contributes to a 'blog' or 'letters' page constitutes a publication and therefore it is material which then cannot be used in the exact form in ensuing publications? Sorry, this is a turn of phrase for which I'm not familiar in this particular context.

Also, I propose any guidelines be developed in conjunction with editors across disciplines, publishers and COPE.

- **Posted on 13/6/2012**

I agree that COPE develops some guidelines on letters to the editor and the response by authors. Some letters to the editors are detail review of the published article commenting on the technique, methods of analysis and interpretation. The authors may choose not to respond. Editorial discretion is required to address this issue.

- **Posted on 15/6/2012**

We are in the process of website changes with the ability for readers to submit comments directly to the website for publication. We are going with the term e-letters. Our planned operation is that all posts will be reviewed prior to be posted and if they add something to a discussion they will be online, unless they are libellous, rude or the like. If they are incoherent or advertising they would not be put online. We are not planning on counting these as prior publications as it will be the way what appears on our letters page is selected.

As for blogs as prior publication - we have just had a live issue of whether a case discussed on a closed group blog was considered as prior publication. After some hunting around in and out of medical publishing we have decided that at this stage we have decided cannot have a single black / white answer and will need to decide case by case. Issues will be author must be able to assign copyright, who the owner of the blog site is (eg. personal blog v commercial venture with advertising), potential reach of blog (eg. some closed local professional blogs / discussion sites), and what this adds to what is on blog. We are planning on seeing how that works and then reviewing.

It would be good if COPE developed some guidelines around both interactions with journal websites and also blogs as prior publications.

- **Posted on 15/6/2012**

As an input to this really important discussion I would like to share with you a commentary I wrote in the Norwegian newspaper Aftenposten recently called Power without accountability. It's based on my experiences about as blogger myself and responsible for establishing the blog of The Norwegian Medical Journal.

The blog has now become such an established medium that the time has come to discuss a common framework for publication ethics. The discussion to be held by COPE on ethical guidelines for blogs under the auspices of journals is important, but the greatest challenges in terms of the ethics of blogging probably lies in blogs where the publisher is an individual.

The roots of the blog go back to 1997, although it became a more universal phenomenon only from the mid-2000s onwards. There is a wide range of blogs. In general, they can be subdivided into enterprise blogs, personal blogs and subject-specific blogs. While the personal blogs take their form from the diary format, the subject-specific blogs more generally reflect genres that we can recognize from the debate, commentary and sometimes the news reporting formats of the traditional mass media.

Advertisers were quick to recognize the potential power and persuasiveness inherent in blogs, and according to a study described in the Norwegian media-industry journal *Kampanje* they believe that in certain contexts bloggers have more credibility than journalists. In the field of health policy in particular, we can see how Norwegian bloggers exert political influence. In contrast to traditional media, however, the bloggers have no shared professional ethics, nor a separate body where ethical issues can be discussed. How and to what extent matters such as the right to respond and the critical attitude to sources are practised remain at the discretion of each individual blogger and his or her convictions, values or training in the field of publication.

Ethical challenges associated with advertising in personal blogs have been debated on several occasions in Norway. Equally important ethical challenges are associated with, for example, reference to other persons and the use of anonymous statements, but such issues have been given surprisingly scant attention. Let me provide an illustration.

One blogger writes a piece, still often anonymously or under a pseudonym, about a statement or claim put forward by someone else. At best, this is a comment on a public statement by a public person, where the quote is provided with a link to the original source. Or is this possibly a misunderstanding or an interpretation of a public statement? At worst, it is a deliberate misconstruction of a public statement taken out of context, with no link to the original source. We cannot always tell which.

The person referred to can enter a correction in the blog's comments field. This presupposes that she has discovered that someone has blogged about her, and that she is willing to enter a discussion forum where the premises are unknown to her. The blogger may remain anonymous, while the persons referred to must let themselves be identified. When the press allows a source to provide a critical statement about someone else in a news report or a feature article, the journalist is required by the Code of Ethics of the Norwegian Press to provide the object of this criticism with an opportunity to respond in the same article. The Code of Ethics also states that in debates, whoever is vilified should as soon as possible receive an opportunity to respond within a known framework. Anonymous criticism must be justified by its benefits to society, and is acceptable only in exceptional cases. Whoever is being quoted has the right to inspect his or her own quotes. This helps avoid factual errors and misunderstandings, and makes the debate more responsible.

Another example that may illustrate this problem is the blogger who quotes one or more other bloggers referring to their experiences with a supplier of services or medical treatment.

Without any checking of the source's credibility, the stories are reported and add up to a conclusion that appears plausible in light of the volume of evidence, although it may be based on false premises. Press ethics require that the credibility of the sources be assessed. What interest does a person have in telling exactly this story, and why does she come forward with it exactly at this time? Anonymous sources must be treated with particular caution. In the field of medical publications the requirement for openness is unconditional. The authors of scientific articles and participants in debates must declare their conflicts of interest. Thus, the readers can form their own opinions about their credibility.

The absence of frameworks for publication ethics may give rise to a situation where the comments field remains filled with people who agree with the blogger. This is because those referred to and other discussants who are uncomfortable with or uncertain of the blogger's rules of the game abstain from writing. I have seen examples of how these have been subsequently ridiculed on Twitter for their unwillingness to join the discussion. In combination with a blog culture where it is considered good form to applaud co-bloggers through comments, "likes" and marketing in other social media, the result is an echo chamber where the blogger's opinions and viewpoints are being reconfirmed ad nauseam.

In 2010, the Norwegian blogger and entrepreneur Thomas Moen proposed to establish a code of ethics for bloggers in Norway. Part of the background was the need to reveal whether bloggers are paid to provide favourable reviews of products. Moen faced fierce criticism; he was accused of having commercial interests at the root of his proposal, of having failed to grasp the essence of blogging, and of wanting to restrict the bloggers' freedom of expression. Part of the reason for this proposal's chilly reception may have been that it failed to take account of the wide range of existing blogs. Similar initiatives in other countries may have given rise to a more constructive debate, but no concrete results as far as I can see.

I hope that the bloggers are now ready to discuss issues of publication ethics in a less prejudiced manner than previously. It is a challenge for personal blogs that to date we have no single common framework or organizational unit towards which all bloggers feel obligated, and which can legitimize shared ethical rules nationally or internationally. The first result that such a discussion should produce ought to be a better awareness of personal responsibility as a publisher. There are a large number of bloggers with long experience in the field of publication who could serve as examples to less experienced publicists. In this context, I believe that the discussions, and gradually also the conclusions, of COPE may provide important contributions to the blogosphere in general. This presupposes that blogs under the auspices of more traditional publishers are also being recognized as blogs, and that no attempts are made to monopolize the concept of a blog and restrict it to apply only to personal blogs. By guaranteeing the readers as well as the persons referred to a minimum of predictability and responsibility I believe that bloggers will help preserve, rather than undermine, the blog format. Stine Camilla Bjerkestrand

- **Posted on 17/6/2012**

Some journal managing softwares, even the Open Journal System (OJS), have a tool to allow comments from readers, but these might not count as previous publications, if I understood correctly. But the editor can moderate or even edit the comments according to internal policies before the online "publication". I believe that along with the discussion of transparency of reader's comments to any published work in a journal, it would be necessary

to establish if the posts would be a real contribution in a constructive way. And if blog posts are to be considered "previous publications", should the journals also require any disclosure of conflict of interests?