What peer review means in the arts, humanities and social sciences?

Introduction
The focus at the Forum was on the humanities and social sciences (HSS). Arts disciplines overlap with humanities somewhat although they also include fine arts and music with juried research and performance which is understudied in terms of publication ethics. Inclusion of the fine and performing arts is critically important but the breadth of trying to cover all of these fields in this Forum needs narrowing because of the time limitations.

What are the issues?
In the recent study by COPE in collaboration with Taylor & Francis on the arts, humanities and social science (AHSS) disciplines, respondents focused on a number of language, quality, diversity and inclusivity issues. In terms of the most frequently identified issues, these were:

1. Addressing language and writing quality barriers while remaining inclusive
2. Issues around the way in which authors receive and respond to criticism
3. Detecting plagiarism and poor attribution standards
4. Issues handling responses from reviewers to authors
5. Issues of self-plagiarism
6. Difficulties in upholding anonymity to authors and/or reviewers during peer review
7. Recognising and dealing with bias in reviewer comments
8. Assuring fair representation of new voices and diverse perspectives
9. Potential conflict of interest between authors and reviewers
10. Managing complaints and appeals

Also, there have been a number of ‘identity politics’ controversies which have raised issues of diversity around who can author articles on diversity topics, who can do some types of research on diversity topics, who can appropriately review such research and who among editors can accept or reject such articles. The recent hoax article problem with respect to fake articles on diversity, inclusivity and identity politics also challenged the merit, quality and legitimacy of the scope and standards of some types of journals, including those that publish feminist scholarship. Recently, this issue was raised again with respect to a study of Ebola in the Congo which was published with no Congolese co-authors. Other issues may have reference to dissimilarities with respect to disciplinary publication patterns and with the importance or lack of importance of matters such as citation and citation frequency.

As noted by Mudditt and Wulf (2016) and Denbo (2020) in articles in the Scholarly Kitchen, HSS disciplines are very dissimilar from STEM disciplines. As Mudditt and Wulf state, with respect to articles in HSS fields “many if not most, HSS fields are ‘book fields’, disciplines in which scholars typically publish their most significant work is book form rather than journal articles…[and] HSS articles tend to be much longer…and HSS tend to publish a small percentage of submissions”.

Questions
1. How should editors, publishers and COPE respond to the differences among AHSS journals compared with STEM disciplines?
2. What mechanisms might be introduced to deal with language quality and inclusivity matters?
3. Are standards of expertise different when addressing certain topics that have social, gender, transgender, race and ethnicity involved in the research?
4. Are some topics off limits for some researchers?
5. Whose problem is this?

References

This will be discussed at the start of the next COPE Forum on 2 June 2020, 4pm-5.30pm BST.

This was discussed at the start of the COPE Forum on Tuesday 2 June 2020.

COMMENTS FROM THE FORUM (Tuesday 2 June 2020) – NOTE, Comments do not imply formal COPE advice, or consensus.

- Language quality and inclusivity are difficult issues for many editors and journals. This is particularly challenging in the social sciences. People are trying to address these issues in a piecemeal way. The onus is often on individual journal editors to either take on the editing of papers with language issues themselves or they may invite board members to take on a role working with authors. These are legitimate and valuable activities. However, to be properly inclusive may depend on the resources, time and goodwill available behind a journal.

- For two-thirds of the world population, English is not their first language, making it difficult for them to get published. This is a systemic problem and editors find that they do not have the time, resources or capacity to tackle the language issues in their working day, and most editors believe it is beyond their scope. Most established universities have relationships and links with other universities around the world. There may be some way we can work together in a long-term strategy to start trying to address these issues.

- Increasingly editors receive papers from non-English speaking countries and the English is often poor. As the paper is going through revisions, editors might advise authors to show the paper to a native English speaker. Often that helps. Another approach might be to advise young researchers embarking on the project to seek out colleagues who are native English speakers. This is one way in which authors can broaden the aspects of the paper, but the native English speaker could take a major responsibility for the writing up. This may be one way in which we can help with the language problems.

- Where there is research involving indigenous populations or communities, editors should check to see that indigenous institutional review boards (IRBs) or community IRBs have been involved in approving the research. Many editors are unaware that native IRBs exist. This applies to research and to descriptions of practices or traditions, for example. The research and sometimes the final paper have to be approved by the indigenous IRB. This is true in Australia, New Zealand and Hawaii. Also, the Navajo in the US have a native indigenous IRB. So, the research needs to be approved by the university IRB and by the indigenous IRB. Due diligence for editors is to ensure that any appropriate IRBs,
and not just the research IRB, but it could be a community IRB, an indigenous IRB or any number of specialty IRBs have approved the research.

- Link for IRB and tribal entities in the US: https://www.ihs.gov/dper/research/hsrp/instreviewboards/
- Specialty IRBs can be found by googling different search terms, such as community, indigenous, or specialty, or very specific terms such as Maori, Hawaiian, Navajo, etc.
- Another frequent problem for indigenous communities is that whereas an IRB might have approved a project, the research findings do not circle back to the community in a way that is useful to the community. The indigenous communities then do not benefit from the research findings or have an opportunity to vet the findings and understand how they might impact on their lives. Mandating some form of an author disclosure statement could be a solution. The parameters would be that authors would have to disclose involvement of local communities in formulating the research project, completing the research project, whether there was ethics approval and how the research findings were delivered back to the community, and if they weren't, explain why not. Publishers and editors would articulate to authors the expectation to disclose this type of information about community involvement. Mandating such a statement would prompt authors to start thinking about it and put the onus on them to identify what community was impacted by their work. Did they consult them? Who should they have consulted if they had not?
- Should people who are not members of a group being studied, be allowed to study the group? In the peer review process, if it looks like the person is not a member of the group being studied, the editor has a responsibility to make sure that the review process includes someone from the group being studied. Experience of the membership gives knowledge that someone who is not part of that group cannot have, and it is the expertise of that experience that editors need to look at the work.
- We need to reduce the bias against social justice journals and the work of the social justice scholars. To give indigenous people a chance to tell their stories in their own voices, we must educate not only editors, but publishers and the press.
- A commitment by editors to a broad social impact is to improve practice globally. Thinking outside the box to establish quality and rigour, ideas include adding non-native speakers to editorial boards to advise from a high level perspective in an important way; editors entering retirement offering mentorship outside the publication process; for society journals, pairing society members internationally with published mentors and see if they can meet the authorship criteria.

**ACTIONS:** COPE will look at developing guidance around this issue, starting with the questions that have been posed here and expanding on some of the issues that have been described.