

FORUM DISCUSSION

Wednesday 9 June 2021, 14:00-15:30 (GMT)
By webinar

Coordinating multi-journal complaints

<https://publicationethics.org/resources/discussion-documents/coordination-multi-journal-complaints>

When and how to involve multiple journals and publishers in dealing with complaints from whistleblowers

Comments from the Forum (9 June 2021) – NOTE, Comments do not imply formal COPE advice, or consensus.

- Often third parties or whistleblowers contact many publishers at the same time, which is helpful, because the publishers are all alerted to the issues. Usually, for individual cases, an editor will raise concerns about a paper with the authors initially and may then follow up with the institution. But in these larger investigations, it would be useful if the publisher with the most cases contacts the institution, along with the other publishers. Coordination at the early stage of an investigation could be very valuable. Therefore, a collective approach in contacting the institution would mean that the institution responds to all of the publishers in a coordinated way, and all parties have the same information.
- As a first step, perhaps editors and publishers could reach consensus regarding the fact that it is better to look at the broader context of a complaint, particularly from the perspective of the institution conducting the investigation.
- Although coordination and working together is a good idea, guidance from COPE that can be shared with editors and authors is needed. A systematic course of action that has been agreed by consensus would be useful.
- How do smaller journals learn about these issues and what can they do? For smaller journals or journals with a few affected articles, systemic problems may not be as visible. How can smaller journals address the broader concerns? A flowchart would be helpful for editors. Discoverability for smaller journals is difficult. A knowledge base across the industry so journals know who to contact would also be helpful.
- Whistleblowers may raise issues with discrepancies in trials that have been conducted, for example, and a single journal might issue a correction. But when the wider context is looked at, more concerns may arise and an expression of concern or retraction might be more appropriate.

- Confidentiality of the review process must be considered. Is there a difference between published papers and those under review? If editors and publishers agree to act together, they must do so transparently and tell the authors that editors might share information. Journals need to have policies stating that in exceptional cases of suspected serious misconduct, pertinent information may have to be shared with other editors for the purposes of investigations.
 - COPE has guidance on sharing of information between editors in cases of misconduct but further guidance is needed on how to achieve coordinated action between editors when multiple problems and cases from the same authors or same authors groups are occurring in multiple journals.
 - Often an error is identified and corrected, and another seemingly explainable error is then identified elsewhere in the same paper and the author requests that it is also corrected. It is difficult for editors to decide when the findings in an article, or a series of articles, perhaps from the same author group, are no longer reliable.
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