

The Role of the Publisher and Codes of Conduct in Ensuring Research Integrity

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1) Introduction

Good morning everyone. I am Jeremy Theobald and I'd like to thank Ken Fulton and Diane Sullenberger for inviting me to talk to you today at this prestigious location. I am the Executive Editor for the Emerging Health Threats Forum but today I am here representing the UK registered charity, the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) of which I am Treasurer.

2) Definition of terms

I've been asked to talk about the role of the publisher and codes of conduct in ensuring research integrity. I think a definition of what I think those terms mean would be useful. At the conference on Research Integrity organised by the ORI and the European Science Foundation in Lisbon last year, everyone seemed to know what research integrity wasn't but not what it was. Research integrity isn't the myriad of publication misconduct issues we deal with at COPE. These are not restricted to the ORI's remit of fabrication, falsification and plagiarism, but include authorship issues (gift, guest and ghost), undeclared conflicts of interest, unethical research and clinical malpractice, duplicate and redundant publication (including salami slicing), and reviewer and editor misconduct among others.

I also don't think there should be any debate as to whether research misconduct and publication misconduct are two different entities. Publication is integral to research and has been since Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society was first published in 1665. Publication is central to the scientific method. The loquacious Drummond Rennie wrote pithily in The Lancet: "Science does not exist until it is published". And it is most usually by publication and subsequent discourse that research misconduct is discovered.

In my 7 years of working for COPE, I've heard very important scientists, including knights of the realm and Nobel Laureates, say publication misconduct occurs very seldom, and doesn't matter anyway because science is self-correcting. I think that's rubbish. It's a phenomenal waste of time and public money. If anything, its incidence is increasing owing to technology, the internet and the control-c and control-v commands.

3) The first codes of conduct

The codes of conduct for authors that most people will be familiar with are Instructions for Authors, which very often contain useless information on how to format a manuscript with certain margins and type sizes. In a paper presented at the 2005 Peer Review Congress in Chicago by Doug Altman from Oxford University the number of words in Instructions for Authors from 35 major medical journals was measured. Formatting accounted for 52% of the words but content of the journal was only 11%. The figure dropped to less than 4% when integrity issues such as definitions of authorship, conflicts of interest, and ethical practices were measured. The percentage of authors who actually read let alone take any notice of Instructions to Authors is still unknown.

4) Guidelines on good publication practice

In 1999, COPE published its first guidelines on Good Publication Practice and subsequently, a Code of Conduct for Editors in 2005. The CSE published its White Paper on Promoting Integrity in Scientific Journal Publications in September 2006. In December 2006, Blackwell published Best Practice Guidelines on Publication Ethics which included 16 flowcharts or algorithms produced by COPE for Editors of journals on how best to deal with publication misconduct. These are available to download and use freely from the COPE website. Elsevier and Informa have followed suit with their Publishing Ethics statements.

Other efforts at raising the standard of publications include the Equator Network by promoting reporting guidelines such as CONSORT. Mike Rossner at JCB seemingly talks at a conference somewhere every week on his journal's policies on image manipulation, and CrossRef have launched their CrossCheck initiative to help the fight against plagiarism.

Communication and Scientific Integrity

5) Do they work?

There is conflicting evidence as to whether guidelines work. A paper in Political Science and Politics from 2001 suggested that when students were told not to plagiarise, they took little notice, but being told their work would be checked with plagiarism-detection software was a remarkably strong deterrent. Conversely, in an article in Scientific American, Mike Rossner said that in the 5 years they have been checking images at Rockefeller University Press, they have seen no decline in the number of doctored images. Fraudulent manipulation has stayed the same but inappropriate manipulation if anything has increased.

6) What can we do?

First, there is a need for more research on publication misconduct. COPE is partnering with CrossCheck to conduct research into plagiarism, as well as funding research from individuals.

I believe what is needed is a simple, universal set of guidelines that ALL publishers sign up and by which all authors must abide. There will be legal considerations that need to be sorted but once they are, proper punitive measures can be taken against authors trying to flout the code. The IASTM and COPE is in the first steps of working on such a document. The CSE / AAAS / National Academy of Sciences and National Library of Medicine should get involved. The best place to start this collaboration would be at the Sixth Peer Review Conference in 2009 or the second World Research Integrity Conference in 2010. If they do manage it, then perhaps they can all agree on a common format for references as well.