



**Forum agenda**  
**Meeting to be held on Monday 11 November 2019**  
**4-5.30pm GMT**  
**By webinar**

- 1. Update on COPE activities by the Chair**
- 2. Forum discussion: Artificial intelligence (AI) in decision making**
- 3. New cases**
  - 19-12 Appropriate scope of review for retractions**
  - 19-13 Reproducibility of methodology**
  - 19-14 Removal of an author**
  - 19-15 Authorship dispute during review process**
- 4. Updates**
  - 19-03 Possible plagiarism**
  - 19-08 Authorship issue related to misleading action of one author**
  - 19-09 Deceased author**

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## 2. FORUM DISCUSSION: Artificial Intelligence (AI) in decision making

<https://publicationethics.org/forum-discussion-topic-artificial-intelligence-ai-decision-making>

Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology has advanced steadily over the past several years, and has started to introduce data-driven solutions to many processes throughout the publication process. AI tools can be developed to provide guidance to humans based on relevant data, or AI may lend toward automation of some processes without human intervention. Some processes already being considered for AI intervention include: journal selection, topic identification, reviewer suggestion, scope assessment, text duplication checking, and statistical analyses; however, this is not a comprehensive list of AI options, and the opportunities for AI use are expanding at a rapid rate.

With the advancement of AI, questions surrounding the relevant ethics arise as to if, when, and how AI could/should be used. In this forum we'd like to start a discussion about these ethical issues, which COPE will use to develop a larger discussion document on this topic.

### *Questions for the Forum:*

1. Is there a clear distinction between technical automation and artificial Intelligence for automatic decision-making or actions taken in the publication process?
2. Are there processes where full technical automation is acceptable or even expected? Are there processes where full automation would be deemed unethical? Similarly, are the processes where AI-aided recommendations would be expected or deemed unethical?
3. What information do journals need to provide to authors (and reviewers) about AI tools in use at their journal?
4. What happens if an author/reviewer disagrees with a recommendation made by or action taken by AI tools? What types of procedures should be put into place to appeal an AI action?

### 3. NEW CASES

#### 19-12 Appropriate scope of review for retractions

An institutional review recommended retraction of certain works by a highly prolific and influential author who has since died. The institutional review focused on a relatively small portion of this author's work. The institution recommended retraction based on deeming the articles unsafe and identifying several concerns, including that the articles' conclusions were implausible.

As a publisher, we are moving forward with reviewing potential retraction of the articles identified by the institutional report. We are questioning whether we should also review the other articles written by the author in the journals' backfile, based on the following:

1. The institutional report cited serious systemic concerns with the research and findings.
2. The author was highly influential.
3. Many of the articles were published in the 1970s/1980s or earlier.
4. Other areas of the author's work/findings seem contrary to current scientific standards (and potentially harmful).

#### Question(s) for the COPE Forum

- When responding to an institutional report recommending retraction of certain articles, should editors review the other works of an author as part of their response (and depending on the reasons the retraction was recommended and the potential relevance to the author's other articles, issuing an editor's note or expression of concern to reference the concerns identified in the report findings for the separate retractions).
- With respect to articles in the journal's historic backfile that reference findings that have since been overturned by later works and do not meet current scientific standards (and are potentially harmful or are supportive of a practice that has since been prohibited), is it appropriate for journal editors to initiate their own review of these articles? Should these articles be retracted, or would these cases be more appropriately handled with a "statement of concern" alerting readers to the concerns with the article's findings
- Is retraction an appropriate action so long (decades) after publication?

### **19-13 Reproducibility of methodology**

A whistle blower contacted journal A regarding two published articles. The articles focus on the effect of energy healing on an in vitro model of disease. The whistle blower raised concerns about the appropriateness and reproducibility of the energy healing methodology used.

The authors were contacted to provide an explanation of the methodology as there was a lack of clarity in the articles. The corresponding author responded with a clear explanation of how they implemented the study but concerns about how this would be reproduced by others persisted.

Consequently, a post-publication peer review was conducted. Unfortunately, the post-publication peer review provided no comment on the energy healing methodology that was implemented. The reviewer focused only on the methodological elements that gave no cause for concern, and summarised that the methods are suitable and valid.

Given this review, the editor who handled the manuscript feels that no editorial action is required. However, concerns surrounding the energy healing methodology and its reproducibility remain. It has been suggested that the reviewer is contacted again for an assessment of the specific energy healing techniques used in these studies.

#### **Question(s) for the COPE Forum**

- If the reviewer or the handling editor determine that the methodology is sound but not reproducible, how should the journal proceed?

### **19-14 Removal of an author**

A paper was submitted to a journal with authors A, B, C, D and E. The paper was peer reviewed. Before acceptance, the corresponding author asked for a new author, author F, to be added, and an existing author, author C, to be removed.

The editorial office asked all of the authors (authors A, B, C, D, E and F) to complete a change of authorship request form and for the corresponding authors to justify the reason for change of authorship.

All of the authors complied with the requirement except author C (the author to be removed). The corresponding author explained that author C did not participate in the paper (ie, they should not have been left on the paper in the first place). The explanations on who did what in the paper confirm this statement, but author C is not contactable to confirm or negate the statement as they are on long term sick leave (author C is not responding to the HR department of their institution).

If author C did not contribute to the paper, their name should not have been left on the submission. However, as the article was submitted with their name on it, it seems wrong to remove their name during the peer review process.

#### **Question(s) for the COPE Forum**

- What course of action would the Forum advise?
- If author C is removed without their permission, could they ask for the article to be retracted?
- If author C remains on the article but they have been ill and not signed off on the final accepted version, could they ask for retraction of the article because they did not agree to the final article being published with their name on it?

### **19-15 Authorship dispute during the review process**

During the review process for a manuscript submitted to our journal, one of the reviewers alerted us that the manuscript appeared to be the work of a collaborator (Dr X) who was not listed as an author on the paper. It became clear that the manuscript's corresponding author (Dr Y, affiliation A) was a postdoctoral researcher supervised by Dr X (previously at affiliation A, recently moved to affiliation B). A third researcher, Dr Z, was an author on the manuscript and at an institution in a different country.

We asked Dr X whether they were aware of the manuscript from their postdoctoral researcher, Dr Y. Dr X was not aware and stated that Dr Y was funded solely by Dr X's grant, and that they were working on a similar manuscript for submission elsewhere. Dr X requested that we withdraw the paper.

We asked Dr Y to confirm whether the author list on the paper was complete and to provide us with funding details. Dr Y replied that there were no other authors, and that the work was completely self-funded.

#### **Question(s) for the COPE Forum**

- Should the journal contact the author's institution (and/or the supervisor's institution) to investigate?
- Should the journal withdraw the manuscript from consideration at this stage, or wait for the results of an investigation?

## 4. UPDATES

### 19-03 Possible plagiarism

We received an email from a whistle blower notifying us about possible plagiarism in two chapters published by us, both authored by the same two authors. The whistle blower accused the authors of substantial plagiarism.

In both chapters there were, indeed, certain unattributed parts of the text, although the majority was properly attributed. Some of the unattributed parts were authored by the authors themselves, while some were taken from third parties. The whistle blower highlighted some properly cited parts of the text, as he claimed they were directly copied from other sources.

As a first step we contacted both authors for an explanation. The authors admitted their mistakes but also explained that they did not have any malevolent intention, and that it was a simple oversight on their behalf. They explained that they were willing to correct (publish a correction of) their chapter.

We then contacted the editor of the book. In his opinion this was not a case of substantial plagiarism and suggested publishing a correction. The whistle blower was not satisfied with the opinion of the editor.

#### *Question(s) for the COPE Forum*

- Is this misconduct serious enough to warrant a retraction, or would it be sufficient to publish a correction?

#### **Advice:**

The Forum advised that a correction is probably appropriate in this case, as there does not seem to be any malicious intent or pattern of deceit.

The whistle blower should not be the main consideration—the journal’s main concern should be to consider whether or not the literature needs to be corrected.

One of the main challenges in book publishing is the lack of established retraction/correction processes for books. It is not considered by book authors or editors as a standard process. While plagiarism in books seems to be common, there are no clear guidelines on how to handle it. However, the Forum would still advise following the COPE flowcharts on plagiarism and contacting the institution if appropriate.

#### **Follow-up:**

The journal decided to publish a correction and asked authors to prepare a draft. Once they receive the draft, the journal will publish the correction.

### 19-08 Authorship issue related to misleading action of one author

Our journal received a manuscript which was a report of an evaluation and enhancement of an online clinical decision support system (CDS) for a specific population at risk of a disease. The online CDS had been developed by a national agency with a mission to support health promotion and disease prevention activities. Evaluation of the CDS was supported through



contracts and sub-contracts. The first author was an employee of a university that was a sub-contractor on the project; the second and third authors were employees of a business that describes itself as providers of innovative scientific and technical solutions for national agencies through a consortium of more than 100 universities. The first author's university was part of this consortium.

The manuscript was submitted to our journal 3 months after the project was finished. Project reports were also submitted to the national agency through the sub-contractors. The second author was the primary conduit of communication between the sub-contractors and the national funding agency.

As a result of the project report and evaluation, the national agency made changes to the online CDS, which included taking down the online version that was reported in the manuscript. When the manuscript was revised, the first author decided to include screenshots from the national agency which described the CDS even though it was no longer available online.

The revised manuscript was submitted, re-reviewed, and after a few small changes, accepted for publication. Shortly thereafter, the editorial associate for the journal contacted the first author to inquire about whether permission was needed to print the screenshots. The first author asked the second author to verify that the national agency was happy about the inclusion of the screenshots. She replied that the agency approved. During the proofing stage, when the second author did not respond to emails, the editorial assistant contacted the agency directly and was told that the programme officer was totally unaware of the existence of the manuscript. Questions surrounding the actions of the second author then emerged pertaining to the details of his communication with the national agency prior to the manuscript being submitted to our journal.

The first author contacted the journal and said the proofs had to be reviewed and approved by the primary funder. As editor, I replied that at the page proof stage, all edits/changes must be very minor. Substantial changes would require that the manuscript be taken out of the production process and depending on the nature of the changes, the entire submission and review process might have to begin anew.

During a telephone call with the first author she stated that she believed the second author had lied regarding eliciting input and obtaining permission from the national agency to submit and publish the manuscript in our journal. Further, the second author had been fired from his job for "ethical transgressions," and was now doing work completely unrelated to his previous job for the sub-contractor. She believed he had contributed little to the original paper. The first author has been dealing with the fallout from this and the funding agency. She asked if she should withdraw the manuscript? Or if not, should the second author be listed as an author?

As editor, I am reluctant to have the second author remain on the manuscript, especially given the fact that he may have done less on the manuscript than he originally said and may not even qualify for authorship according to the ICMJE guidelines. The first author agrees with this, but she is concerned that he may take litigious action against her, the university where she works, or the journal.

*Question(s) for the COPE Forum*

- Should the journal reject the manuscript? Is it unsalvageable at this point?

- If the journal does not reject the manuscript, should the second author be removed? How could that be handled?

**Advice:**

The editor provided an update to the Forum. Although the authors were originally working at the same agency, there was a change in employment and only the first author was now employed there. Through conversations with the third author, it became apparent that the second author had delegated manuscript writing to the third author, who was an intern at the time for the consulting agency. Subsequently, the second author had been fired from the consulting agency for unclear reasons.

The Forum agreed that it would be unwise for this paper to go forward given the authorship conflicts, the questionable timeliness or veracity of the data, the status of the permissions from the federal funding agency, and the lack of response from the second author (presumably because he had left the agency). The first and third authors could be encouraged to write a different paper in light of the problems. While the Forum recognized the editor's wish to try and help the author get their paper published, the process should stop at the point of consent or lack thereof and when the authorship issues became questionable. Further changes by the programme officer would likely change the paper significantly such that it would need to be re-reviewed.

The majority of the Forum believed the paper should be rejected even though it is currently at the page proof stage. The editor asked if rejection should occur earlier in the process and suggested asking the author to withdraw the paper. Another suggestion was to check with the publisher if there is a technical term for suspending the paper at this point.

The editor raised the issue that this paper, because it is interesting, a timely topic, and has undergone peer review and revisions, and copyediting, might be published in a predatory journal so it was fortuitous that the issue was caught prior to publication.

**Follow-up**

The author withdrew the article from consideration. The author then revised the article, working with the funding agency. She is planning to submit it as a new manuscript (not a revised version of the previous paper).

**19-09 Deceased author**

After a manuscript was accepted, an author passed away before they could complete the conflict of interest statement and copyright transfer documents. The publishing company requires that all authors complete these documents prior to publishing.

The other authors do not want to remove the deceased author from the manuscript.

**Question(s) for the COPE Forum**

- Who has the authority to complete these documents for the deceased author?
- Are there any special notations that should be made in the manuscript?

**Advice**

The Forum asked for clarification from the editor regarding when in the publication cycle the author died and did the author see the final version of the submitted and accepted article? The

editor told the Forum that the author had seen the final accepted version. Hence the Forum agreed that it seems reasonable that the author should remain on the byline. It would be possible to ask his next of kin or executor to verify the conflict of interest (COI) statement to obtain a notarized statement, if that is required, if the editor is not comfortable taking an informal statement from the co-authors.

For the journal, there are three components: clarifying the COI statement, fulfilling the authorship criteria and signing the copyright agreement. There is still a non-financial aspect to potential COIs, which seems to be difficult to ascertain with certainty.

For the purposes of transparency, it would be useful for the editor to add a statement or footnote on the paper, including the date of death in relation to participation in authorship and a statement to the effect that to the best of their ability, the journal has determined there was no COI. It is questionable that the deceased author would benefit from any COI. Further, the Forum agreed that COIs, leading to bias in the work, would have been uncovered at the time of grant funding or peer review of the manuscript.

The Forum applauded the editor's due diligence in handling this matter.

### **Follow-up**

The corresponding author contacted the deceased author's widower, who was also a medical journal editor. As he understood the issues, and knew of the decedent's work, he was able to meaningfully sign the copyright agreement and declaration of conflicts of interest.

The journal did not publish a note in the paper indicating that the author was deceased as the authors decided not to include such a statement. The journal could have posted such a notice with the article had it been felt there was a need to explain about copyright or conflicts, but in this case, it was felt this was not necessary.