

FORUM AGENDA

Meeting to be held on Wednesday 9 June 2021
14:00-15:30 (GMT)
By webinar

Agenda

1. Update on COPE activities by the Chair
2. Forum discussion: Coordinating multi-journal complaints
3. New cases
 - 21-04 Ethics approval and consent
 - 21-05 Unresponsive authors delaying publication
 - 21-06 Can two DOIs be assigned to the same manuscript?
 - 21-07 Manuscript submitted based on retracted paper
4. Updates
 - 20-02 Paper published without permission or acknowledgement from institution
 - 21-01 Preprint plagiarism
 - 21-02 Author anonymity at the final proofreading stages

2. Forum discussion: 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

Complaints received from whistleblowers can develop into large investigations with multiple journals, editors, and publishers involved. Such complaints may involve many articles from a single author group or multiple author groups whose articles are linked by certain traits. Some journals or publishers may only have one or two papers involved but others may have tens of articles in question. Following best practice for investigating the allegations, the editor would approach the authors for an explanation for each article and review the authors' responses to the issue in that article. Appropriate editorial action is then taken on that article, usually without reference to the broader concerns.

As such complaints become more frequent, should editors continue the previous best practice to treat each case individually or in isolation? Taken in the context of just one or two papers, it could be an acceptable resolution to issue an erratum or correction for an error, but how much consideration should be given to the wider context of the concerns when looking at errors in individual papers?

Current guidance on information sharing between editors states that sharing may be appropriate if more than one journal is thought to be involved. However, it is not clear how this information sharing could, or should, lead to coordinated action between editors.

Question for discussion

1. How much consideration should an editor give to the wider context of the complaint, outside of their own journal and/or publisher?
2. At what point, if ever, in a large multi-publisher investigation should editors coordinate their actions? How could editors efficiently coordinate actions without slowing the correction of the scientific record unnecessarily?
3. When issuing a post-publication notice, in what circumstances would it be appropriate to acknowledge broader concerns beyond the linked article?
4. Journals, or publishers, with many affected articles can internally coordinate post-publication editorial action and could draw attention to broader concerns by self-reference. For journals with few affected articles, how can broader concerns or context be pointed to or acknowledged?
5. Publishers are reporting that after an error is identified and corrected, another seemingly explainable error is then identified elsewhere in the same paper and the author requests that to be corrected as well. At what point should editors consider that the findings are unreliable and a retraction may be appropriate?

3. New cases

21-04 Ethics approval and consent

A complainant raised six articles to the attention of the editor-in-chief, with concerns about ethical approval and possible conflicts of interest regarding the way that approval was granted. The studies all involved minority populations.

Ethics approval had been granted by the institutions for all of the manuscripts involved, along with written informed consent and corresponding ethics codes and approval, which all seemed to be in order. Nevertheless, there is some scepticism due to the political context and the nature of the author affiliations, some of which are governmental.

Next step being considered are:

- Asking the authors for more information about the conditions under which the consent was provided although it will be difficult to judge any claims.
- Publishing an expression of concern although the potential for resolution of an investigation is small and an expression of concern might seem heavy handed.
- Updating the complainant and ‘closing’ the case for now.

Questions for the Forum

1. To what extent should publishers question statements about ethical approval?
2. Are there any alternative actions?

21-05 Unresponsive authors delaying publication

The journal received a submission which proceeded through peer review and was recommended for publication. The authors responded to the revision letter, providing a detailed itemised list of changes and revised their manuscript accordingly. The revised manuscript was subsequently accepted for publication.

The normal process for articles in this journal is that when papers are accepted and the files are transferred to the production department, the author accepted manuscript is published online as an advance article and simultaneously published in PubMed. This version of the manuscript is still live on the journal website, listed as an advance article, and on PubMed.

Proofs were sent to the corresponding author as normal, and all authors were chased repeatedly by email for several months, and also by telephoning the contact numbers provided by the authors and other phone numbers for their institutions. No answer, busy, or recorded messages and no voicemail options were encountered, even when calling during working hours in the authors' country.

Final reminder type emails with firm deadlines were sent, emailed from different email addresses in case the emails were getting stuck in their spam filters. Journal policy is that authors must sign off the proof version of their manuscript before final publication of the version of record. The paper is in limbo because the advance article has been published on the journal website and in PubMed but the final version cannot be published or put into an issue. The advance article has been cited eight times in leading journals within the field. It does not appear that this article has been published in another journal simultaneously.

Questions for the Forum

1. How should the journal proceed?
2. Can the final version be published without sign off from the authors?
3. Should the advance article be withdrawn?

21-06 Can two DOIs be assigned to the same manuscript?

A preprint server owned by a commercial publishing company posted a paper and assigned a DOI to the preprint. The manuscript was then submitted to peer reviewed journal X, owned by a different publisher. Assuming acceptance at the journal, can the article be published under a different DOI belonging to journal X?

At journal X, Crossref registration is automatic. However, can two different DOIs be assigned to the same content. According to their website (<https://www.doi.org>): "DOI...is related to a single resource. If the URLs or services change over time, eg, the resource moves, this same DOI will continue to resolve to the correct resources or services at their new locations."

Question for the Forum

1. Can two DOIs be assigned to the same article?

21-07 Manuscript submitted based on retracted paper

A case was published in a journal. After publication, the author contacted the journal to ask for withdrawal of the article because of some mistakes. After careful and considered review of the content of this paper by a duly constituted expert committee, the paper was found to be incomplete due to the dependent variable used in the analysis and the literature review used.

The paper was retracted. After the retraction was published, the author submitted a new article, which was based on the retracted paper.

Question for the Forum

1. Should the author reference in the new article that the original article was already published?

4. Updates

20-15 Paper published without permission or acknowledgement from institution

An author affiliated with a research institution R published two papers as a single author, one of them in a journal of publisher A.

After publication, publisher A was contacted by the research integrity officer of institution R with a letter of concern. The letter stated that the research institution has conducted a formal investigation and concluded that the author failed to acknowledge fully the likely contributions made by other staff and students in his research group, even though his work was heavily influenced by the ideas and experimental results of other members of staff in the research group. The formal investigation panel agreed unanimously that the author had behaved unprofessionally and upheld the finding that research misconduct had taken place regarding the submission and subsequent publication of the single author paper in the journal.

The research institute said that they had not been able to reach an agreement with the author about the situation and asked the publisher to publish an erratum (or some similar note of concern) with the text: "The work was carried out while the author was at [xxx] funded by [xxx]. The experimental scheme set out in figure [xxx] was influenced by discussion with the [xxx] groups at [xxx]"

The journal contacted the author, who did not agree with publishing an erratum. The author stated that: the work was not exclusively carried out while being at [xxx], but it represented the results of a continued effort since when he was at another institute (which has been acknowledged in the paper); he was not made aware of the role of the funding agencies [xxx] during his years of employment; he states that the sketch in the figure is his original idea and is not an experimental scheme, but rather may be used to derive various experimental schemes for prototyping.

The author counter-proposed publishing an erratum as follows: "The author also acknowledges the collaborative effort in the submission of experimental proposals [xxx], based on the above theoretical framework, to build the first ever [xxx], which he initiated and led as the Principal Investigator, using the [xxx] Facility at the [xxx], in discussion with the [xxx] teams (funded by [xxx]) at [xxx]. The author further acknowledges the strong merits of this collaborative effort which warrants its continuation as already initiated by the author."

The research institute found the proposed text unacceptable as it both misrepresents and seeks to undermine the findings of the research institute's investigation. Furthermore, it claimed that the author led a collaborative project in relation to the development of an experimental prototype, which is not borne out by the facts. The research institute cannot agree to the publication of such a misleading statement. They ask the publisher instead to consider publishing a statement alongside the author's paper to confirm that it has been subject to a formal finding of research misconduct for making use of the ideas of others without permission or acknowledgement. The institute argues that such a statement is necessary for transparency, and to correct the scientific record.

Questions for the Forum

- Has the Forum seen similar situations where the author and the author's research institution disagree about proper and adequate recognition of contributors to a published work?
- Is it appropriate to publish a statement of concern that the paper has been subject to a formal finding of research misconduct for making use of the ideas of others without permission or acknowledgement?

Advice

The Forum agreed that the institution needs to resolve the issue with the authors. The editor cannot adjudicate in this situation, but they can ensure the publication record is up to date and correct. Hence the Forum advised publishing an expression of concern until consensus is reached by the institution and the authors. In the expression of concern, the editor can describe the findings of the institution and the objections from the authors. Authorship and contributorship disputes cannot be resolved by editors and should be directed to the institution. As there was another institution involved, the editor may wish to contact the second institution and ask them to conduct an investigation but still publish an expression of concern while this is ongoing.

Another option is to threaten retraction of the article if no agreement is reached. The editor could give the institution and the authors a time limit, after which the journal will retract the article.

Follow-up

The author agreed to publish an erratum, worded so that it satisfied his former host institution.

Follow-up (May 2021)

The journal followed the recommendation from the COPE Forum and wrote to the author announcing the decision to publish an editorial expression of concern, which was presented to the author in final draft form. The author responded promptly, saying that he contacted his former institution and agreed to publish the erratum as had been worded by the institution. The erratum has now been published. The journal considers this resolution the best outcome possible.

21-01 Preprint plagiarism

Author group A deposited a preprint onto a preprint server and simultaneously submitted the manuscript to journal A. Peer review in journal A took some considerable time, but the paper (paper A) was eventually published. During the long peer review of paper A, author group A noticed that another set of authors, author group B, had published paper B in journal B. While paper B was submitted several weeks after paper A (and after the preprint appeared), peer review in journal B was somewhat faster, and so paper B was published before paper A. Author group A suspect that some of the data and language in paper B was taken from their preprint, and that author group B had used this to "scoop" paper A. A citation to the preprint was given in paper B but author group A felt that this was only to guard author group B against accusations of plagiarism, and certainly did not assign full credit to their original discoveries.

Author group A feels like author group B took advantage of some key results in their preprint to accelerate some major points in paper B. Unfortunately, author group A did not raise this with journal B. Journal B has only found out about this through word of mouth. Journal B does not know exactly which paper they refer to.

Questions for the Forum

- Is there a case to answer here?
- Should the editor of journal B advise author group A (who remain anonymous to journal B, and who can only be contacted through one of the editors of journal B) that they should formally report the issue to journal B so that it can be investigated as a plagiarism case in a published manuscript?
- What measures can journal B take to help prevent this happening in the future (eg, better training for editors and reviewers to identify the issue)?

Advice

The Forum believed there was no case to answer because journal B has not been contacted by author group B looking for a resolution. A formal complaint has not been received by the journal so it is not the journal's responsibility to actively pursue this matter.

The Forum noted that plagiarism detection software does scan some of the common preprint sites and will indicate if direct plagiarism has occurred from a preprint.

Measures that the journal can take to help prevent this happening in the future could be for the journal to review their author guidelines to ensure there is sufficient information on how to cite preprints, if the journal allows preprint citations. If a case of plagiarism arises, the journal may wish to follow COPE's flowchart on [what to do if you suspect plagiarism in a published paper](#), which advises the editor to contact the authors initially in a neutral tone for an explanation, before taking the matter further.

Follow-up

The journal took the advice of the Forum and alerted the editors to the issue raised so that they would be better informed going forward, and could hopefully pick up any issues like this in the future. As no formal complaint was made, as per the Forum's advice, no further action was taken. The journal considers the case closed.

21-02 Author anonymity at the final proofreading stages

A newly relaunched open access, peer reviewed journal operates a double blind peer-review system. At all stages of the review, until the decision to accept has been taken, neither the author nor the reviewer can identify the other. The journal always uses at least two reviewers, who are also unaware of the identity of each other.

After the author has been told that the article is accepted, it may require some final proofreading (eg, footnote cross references, typos, etc). It is easier to do final checks on copies that include the author details. No further decisions as to whether to publish are taken at this stage. However, the reviewers are given the choice as to whether to review a re-submission at any stage, including after acceptance. Also, some individuals who had acted as reviewers at earlier stages, agree to help with these final checks, and are no longer acting as reviewers, but as copyeditors.

Questions for the Forum

1. Does having the author details on the final copies, that may be seen by the reviewers, breach the double blind system?
2. Is it acceptable practice for reviewers to help with final checks (eg, grammar, accuracy of footnotes, etc) after acceptance (in effect, acting as copyeditors)?

Advice

The Forum noted it is unusual for reviewers to be involved in the handling of papers after the peer review process. Does having the author details on the final copies, that may be seen by the reviewers, breach the double blind system? The Forum thought that it was an acceptable breach of the double blind system because the paper has been accepted at that point.

The Forum recommended that the journal should clearly state their policies on their website, describe their processes and explain why the double blind review system is not possible at the final stages. For small journals with a small publishing budget, using reviewers to help with the final checks is unusual but is an acceptable practice as long as the journal is transparent about its policies and procedures.

If the reviewers are editing files at the final checks, and the authors are sent the edited files, the reviewers could potentially be revealed to the authors if they have left their identity in the file properties. Although the reviewers will know who the authors are as soon as the paper is published, the authors do not know who the reviewers are in the double blind review process so the journal should ensure that this is maintained with their current process.

In summary, the double blind peer review is in place at the journal during the peer review process, and breaching the review process when the authors become visible to the reviewers is acceptable because it is after acceptance of the manuscript. Reviewers acting as copyeditors is an unusual but acceptable practice. However, the journal should be transparent about their processes and the breach of the double blind process, and ensure their internal processes are secure so that the identities of the reviewers are not revealed to the authors

Follow-up

The editorial board found the Forum's advice very helpful and the journal is making changes to the information on their website as a result of the Forum's suggestions.