



Forum agenda
Meeting to be held on Monday 11 February 2019
BY WEBINAR

At 4pm–5.30pm (GMT)

- 1. Update on COPE activities by the Chair**
- 2. Forum discussion: Diversity and inclusion in research publishing**
- 3. New cases**
 - 19-01 Reviewer requesting addition of multiple citations of their own work**
 - 19-02 Dispute arising from peer review of a rejected comment and published correction**
 - 19-03 Possible plagiarism**
 - 19-04 Suspected plagiarism**
- 4. Updates**
 - 18-08 Scientific misconduct claim from a whistleblower where the institution will not investigate**
 - 18-13 Self-plagiarism and suspected salami publishing**
 - 18-15 Peer reviewer contacted by author**
 - 18-17 Victim of article theft wants correction to list their name, not retraction**

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2. FORUM DISCUSSION: Diversity and inclusion in research publishing

<https://publicationethics.org/forum-discussion-topic-comments-please-12>

It is widely recognised that teams and organisations in all sectors of society perform better and make better decisions when they embrace diversity and inclusion in their culture and, particularly, among their leadership. Diversity refers to having a wide range of human differences in the composition of a team. Inclusion, inclusivity, or inclusiveness refers to ensuring that all team members feel engaged and their contributions and perspectives are valued. Efforts to actively promote both diversity and inclusion need to be ongoing, given that demographics and team composition continuously change with time.

Within the scholarly publishing industry, diversity and inclusion principles and practices apply to authors, peer reviewers, editorial boards, and academic and professional societies, as well as editorial and publishing personnel.

Among recent initiatives to promote diversity and inclusion in research publishing are the publication of the *Diversity and Inclusion Manifesto for Scholarly Publishing* by the Association of Learned and Professional Society Publishers [1] and the establishment of the Coalition for Diversity & Inclusion in Scholarly Communications (C4DISC) [2].

Peer Review Week 2018 highlighted the importance of diversity and inclusion in increasing the quality, fairness, and integrity of academic peer review. In an online survey conducted to mark the event, COPE found that 71% of 384 respondents cited that their employer or publication values diverse involvement and opinions in its peer review process. However, only 25% were aware of a diversity policy for recruiting members of their peer reviewer pool, and only 13% said there is in-house training to promote diversity and inclusion in peer review [3].

COPE is keen to promote diversity and inclusion in not only peer review but also scholarly publishing in general, by facilitating dialogue and developing resources for key stakeholders in the publishing landscape.

For example, the upcoming COPE North American seminar is themed “Challenges and solutions: issues of inclusivity and diversity in the humanities and social sciences” [4]. And COPE is currently conducting a trial membership programme with several research institutions. Indeed, research institutions are important stakeholders in the research publishing ecosystem, not least because they train researchers to become the next generation of scholarly authors, peer reviewers, editors, and leaders of scholarly societies.

COPE would now like to develop a discussion document on diversity and inclusion in research publishing that is relevant to all stakeholders, and this will be the discussion topic at the start of the next COPE Forum.

Questions

- How can COPE help members (and non-members) to encourage diversity and inclusion?
- Should and how can diversity and inclusion be incorporated into COPE’s Core Practices?

- How can diversity and inclusion be improved for different communities involved in research publishing?
- What challenges are there (or may arise) and how could they be overcome?

References

1. Association of Learned and Professional Society Publishers. Diversity and Inclusion Manifesto for Scholarly Publishing. <https://diversitymanifesto.wordpress.com/>
2. Coalition for Diversity & Inclusion in Scholarly Communications (C4DISC). <https://c4disc.org/principles/>
3. COPE. Diversity in Peer Review: Survey Results. <https://publicationethics.org/news/diversity-peer-review-survey-results>
4. COPE North American Seminar, 3 May 2019. Registration site. <https://publicationethics.org/news/challenges-and-solutions-issues-inclusivity-and-diversity-humanities-and-social-sciences>

3. NEW CASES

19-01 Reviewer requesting addition of multiple citations of their own work

A handling editor noticed a reviewer report where the reviewer instructed the author to cite multiple publications by the same reviewer in their manuscript. The handling editor noted a similar instance involving this reviewer from the past and requested the editorial office to look into his reviewing history. This uncovered a concerning pattern of behaviour where the reviewer habitually asked authors to add citations to his work when reviewing their manuscript, often when there was no scientifically legitimate reason to do so.

A deeper analysis of this reviewer's activity showed that he predominantly asked for his own papers to be cited, as well as citations to papers that heavily cited his work. In some cases, he requested for more than 30 citations of his own papers to be added to a single manuscript. His citation requests were heavily weighted towards recent publications, giving preference to citations within a particular timeframe.

According to COPE's ethical guidelines, reviewers should "refrain from suggesting that authors include citations to your (or an associate's) work merely to increase citation counts or to enhance the visibility of your or your associate's work; suggestions must be based on valid academic or technological reasons".

The handling editor brought the issue to the journal's editors-in-chief to see if there was legitimate scientific reason for these papers to be cited. (Note: in our editorial structure, handling editors make final decisions about papers; the editors-in-chief do not review decision letters before they are sent out). After reviewing the papers in question, the editors-in-chief did not see a reason why these additional citations were scientifically necessary. The editors-in-chief then drafted a letter to the reviewer to ask him to explain the pattern and why he requested these additional citations. The handling editor and editors-in-chief agreed to allow time for the reviewer to respond. No response was received.

The reviewer has only one academic affiliation, however it is with an institution that has been previously found to offer financial incentives to Clarivate's highly cited researchers in exchange for the researcher's agreement to include an affiliation to their institution in future publications. The reviewer is self-employed, thus without an institutional employer, and the editorial team have no direct recourse to an institution in this case.

In response to this case, the journal has banned this individual from reviewing for the journal. We are writing an editorial to clarify the journal's official position on when reviewer requested citations are appropriate and to offer some suggestions to help others detect this behaviour. Editorial staff have convened a meeting with all the journal's handling editors to ensure they are all familiar with COPE and the journals ethical standards, and to ensure they are looking out for cases of citation manipulation. Instructions to reviewers have also been updated to make it clear that there must always be a scientifically legitimate reason to suggest the author add citations to existing scholarship.

Question(s) for the COPE Forum

- What does COPE recommend to the journal editorial team in this case where the reviewer does not have an institutional body to turn to in order to continue the investigation?
- What else can the journal do to ensure that other journals working with this reviewer are aware of his evident citation manipulation?
- Should the journal also ban this individual as an author, both out of concern for his potential for future ethical problems, but also as a deterrent for those who might behave similarly?
- What, if anything, should the journal have done differently? Are there other actions the journal can take?
- Do other journals have safeguards in place that would help identify a pattern such as this one more easily?

19-02 Dispute arising from peer review of a rejected comment and published correction

In 2016, group A published manuscript X in our journal. In early 2017, group B submitted a comment critical of the published manuscript. Following peer review, in accordance with the journal's then active policy, the comment was rejected from further consideration. The policy allowed for the author of the original comment to be one of the peer reviewers of the comment.

The lead author of group A, acting as one of the three referees for the comment, indicated in their confidential comments to the editor that group A would be submitting a correction to address issues arising from the comment. Group A duly submitted and published a correction to manuscript X. Soon after, the journal was contacted by a legal representative of group B to express their concern over the publication of the correction by group A. The representative indicated a concern that the unpublished comment submitted to the journal contributed in part to the submission and publication of the correction. Group B researchers considered that the submission of their comment under the journal's then active comment/reply policy had allowed the authors of the correction to prepare their manuscript using material that they had been privy to only via their involvement in the peer review of the comment, and that this fact had not been acknowledged in the correction.

Group B requested the journal withdraw the correction and re-open the peer review of the comment. As the journal's management team considered that the first request would leave an error in the scientific record uncorrected and the second request was unlikely to result in a change of outcome, the journal instead investigated the matter raised by the representative Group B, with the goal of preparing a new correction for publication to take into account the facts of the matter following the investigation.

The investigation identified an error on the part of the administrative team that contributed to this situation; namely, failing to ensure the authors of the correction provided due acknowledgement of the provenance of the correction. As part of the investigation, the journal contacted group A for their input. The authors agreed they should have included an acknowledgement, but not having seen similar acknowledgements on other corrections published by the journal declined to include one in their correction. However, group A also noted that they had exchanged email correspondence with group B, prior to the submission of the comment, about some of the matters subsequently included in the comment. Group A have been at pains to stress that their correction was not primarily prompted by the comment.

The journal has engaged with both parties to find a mutually agreed statement on the chain of events that contributed to the publication of the correction, with a view to republishing the correction to clarify both the scientific record and the sequence of events. This has resulted in a great deal of time and effort being expended on several draft statements prepared by the journal over the previous 14 months.

As the matter remains unresolved between the two groups, the journal's team has elected to publish nothing at all. The groups have been informed of this, and that the journal remains amenable to publishing a statement if the two parties are able to agree a form of words between themselves.

Nevertheless, the publisher regularly reviews its working practices and editorial policies, and this case has contributed to a change of the policies enacted by the publisher to reduce the likelihood of similar sequences of events and outcomes in future. Taking our experience in this case into account, and aiming to address potential future conflicts of interest in submitted comments, a new comment/reply policy has been adopted. In hindsight, the previous comment/reply policy was problematic for a number of reasons, including the potential conflict of interest in having the author of the original paper being involved in the peer review of the submitted comment.

Question(s) for the COPE Forum

- Given the apparent impossibility of the two parties agreeing a form of words, and the threats of legal action and publishing their own version elsewhere, is the journal justified in choosing NOT to publish anything? Would it be better to publish the journal's view anyway and accept the potential risks?
- While recognising the publisher's original comment/reply policy contributed to this matter, does the Forum have any advice on how the publisher/journal could or should handle similar disputes in future? The policy has been amended to reduce the possibility of conflicts of interest.
- How far should the publisher go in trying to resolve disputes between groups (especially where, as in this case, only one party has actually published in the journal)?

19-03 Possible plagiarism

We received an email from a whistleblower notifying us about possible plagiarism in two chapters published by us, both authored by the same two authors. The whistleblower 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 whistleblower 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 whistleblower 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?

19-04 Suspected plagiarism

A single author submitted a paper to our journal. A similarity check revealed 48% similarity with another published paper. The published paper was by different authors—5 in total. The similarities between the papers were in the introduction, methods and discussion sections. The submitting author did not reference the published article.

We queried the corresponding author but have not received a response.

Question(s) for the COPE Forum

- What shall we do given this circumstance?
- Should we withdraw/reject the article and embargo the author.
- Should we contact the author's institute without receiving any clarifications from the author?
- How long should we wait for a response from the author before reporting to the institute?

4. UPDATES

18-08 Scientific misconduct claim from a whistleblower where the institution will not investigate

A journal received an allegation of scientific misconduct from an anonymous individual stating they were from the group that had written the paper (Institution-1, there are two institutions involved in this research). The email stated that the scientific bases of the article were unreliable. The paper was currently with the authors who were revising the paper after the first round of review, and additional experiments were required.

The editors followed-up with the whistleblower requesting more information and their identity. The whistleblower emailed back, concealing their identity, but provided additional information, highlighting a specific component of the research as unreliable.

Institution-2 (the one that was not claimed by the whistleblower) was informed of the whistleblower. Institution-2 responded by saying that the authors believed there was an initial problem with the data used, but these had been updated and were not fabricated. Institution-2, however, was not the institution that carried out the experiments in question.

The editors made the decision to obtain more information. On resubmission of the paper, the three original reviewers looked at the manuscript but were not told about the whistleblower. All three were satisfied with the changes made to the paper and approved publication. A fourth reviewer was asked to look at the paper and told about the anonymous whistleblower. This reviewer found no clear evidence of fraud, but he could not assess the experiments in question. This reviewer did, however, raise new concerns about technical deficiencies in the work. Aside from fraud, these new issues made it unsuitable for publication in the journal.

The editors requested outside assessment from researchers with knowledge of the work to redo the informatics analyses to see if the raw data (included with the paper) gave the same results as the processed data. Again, there was no clear evidence of fraud, but there was difficulty in complete reproducibility due to poor methods descriptions and lack of access to all of the data.

At this time the whistleblower sent an email recanting his/her original statement and saying they have assessed the work and the authors have made the appropriate changes to fix everything. This was an odd email as there had been no change in the manuscript since the resubmission.

The editors ultimately decided to reject the paper based on remaining concerns of misconduct and the heavy criticism of the fourth reviewer.

The authors from Institution-1 requested a meeting with the editors. At this meeting the authors: expressly denied misconduct; showed the editors pages of data from the experiments of concern; and provided the editor with a copy of an email from an anonymous whistleblower that the leader of the group had received 2 days before the journal editor had received their anonymous email. This anonymous individual claimed to be from Institution-1, and stated that one of the authors (from Institution-1) had visited their institution and removed data.

An additional oddity is that the email addresses from the whistleblower to the editor and to the authors were created to indicate they came from the institutions claimed. Investigation of the email origins showed that the two anonymous whistleblower emails came from the same individual, not two different individuals as claimed.

Question(s) for the COPE Forum

- How should editors act on a tip from an anonymous whistleblower, where there is uncertainty about the unknown person's goals and that, should institutions take punitive action without investigation of the whistleblower's intent, careers could be heavily impacted.
- If the institutions, when informed, decide to take no action, do the editors have a responsibility to investigate to get a better sense of whether they should further push the institution given the authors can simply submit a paper elsewhere where those editors will not know about the potential for misconduct.
- Due to the importance for the career of individuals on this paper, can the editors aid the authors submitting elsewhere, given that the whistleblower lied, but there is no way to disprove fraud. Or should the editors provide the information about the whistleblower to the institution.

Advice

This was a very complicated situation and the editors have no clear means to further investigate beyond what they have done already. The editors had gone far beyond what is normally assumed to be the role of the journal in such cases. The advice from the Forum was for the journal to contact the head of the institutions and the ethics board. The editor can use the Office for Research Integrity (ORI) website to check affiliations if the institutions are outside the US (there are some listings of cooperating national ethics approval boards). The Forum advised contacting the authors first before informing the institution. The institutions should also be informed of the whistleblower's behaviour and the apparent falsification of email addresses to create the appearance of two whistleblowers.

Suggestions for another journal and assistance with revision might be appropriate in some cases. Because of the issues raised by review #4, the article was not suitable for this journal but there are other journals in the field that might accept a revised article. The suggestions for revision already provided to the authors will help them modify the article and correct any errors.

Follow-up

The editor informed the authors of the overall discussions at the COPE Forum, saying that they had done all they could based on COPE guidelines in terms of trying to assess the veracity of the claims (and detailed the standard COPE guidelines). The editor told the authors that he felt that at this point, further investigation into the situation had to move to their institution if they wanted to pursue that avenue and gain some resolution. Because of the serious nature of this issue, the journal told the authors that they had an additional referee look at the work, one who was very familiar with the journal. He/she raised additional concerns about the work from the standpoint of suitability to the journal, and hence the decision was made that the work was not suited to the journal.

The authors accepted the decision.

18-13 Self-plagiarism and suspected salami publishing

Journal A accepted a manuscript with six authors in June 2017, which was published in January 2018. Several months later, the editors of journal A found that journal B had published paper B, which shared striking similarities to paper A. Journal B accepted paper B in November 2017 and published it in February 2018. The first author of paper B was different but the remaining four authors were from paper A.

The editorial board of journal A concurred that papers A and B were written (i) in an identical manner or format of presentation; (ii) under the same study design with only minor changes that would make little clinical difference; and (iii) with extensive use of recycled texts which covered most of the papers, including the majority of the materials and discussion sections.

Had the editors of journal A known that the authors had submitted or planned to submit paper B to another journal, they would have rejected paper A. The claim now is that the authors have self-plagiarised the manuscripts, with potential salami publication.

Question(s) for the COPE Forum

- When self-plagiarism and suspected salami publishing is found in a published article, what can the editor do?
- Should the editor inform the other journal editor?
- In such cases, should the article be retracted from both journals?

Advice

The editor may wish to consult some of the COPE resources: for example, the flowcharts on what to do if you suspect redudant publication (<https://publicationethics.org/resources/flowcharts>), Text recycling guidelines for editors (https://publicationethics.org/files/Web_A29298_COPE_Text_Recycling.pdf) and Sharing of information among editors-in-chief regarding possible misconduct ([https://publicationethics.org/files/Sharing%20of Information Among EiCs guidelines web version 0.pdf](https://publicationethics.org/files/Sharing%20of%20Information%20Among%20EiCs%20guidelines%20web%20version%200.pdf)).

Articles should be retracted to correct the literature not to punish the authors. The Forum advised that it is up to journal B to retract the paper for redundant publication or salami publishing because journal A published the article first. Hence it is journal B's responsibility here to address the misconduct. The editor should contact journal B and inform them of the issue.

Is it possible that the authors were inexperienced and did not think their paper was going to be accepted by journal A because of the time between acceptance and publication? The authors may then have slightly altered the paper and submitted it to journal B? The advice from the Forum was to give the authors the benefit of the doubt, and to contact the authors for an explanation. It is always best to first ask the authors to explain how this has happened. It may be that this is an educational opportunity.

The Forum advised that salami publishing is difficult to prove, and is a judgement call on the part of the editor. In this case, it is a judgement that journal B needs to make.

Follow-up

The editor followed the COPE flowchart on what to do if you suspect reduntant publication, asking the authors for an explanation. After receiving an explanation, the editorial board made a final decision and informed the authors of their decision.

The editorial board found that redundant publication, or salami slicing, was not applicable in this case. Regarding text recycling, however, the board found that this case did meet its definition, based on the excessive volume of verbatim sentences shared between the two articles. In the light of this development, a note was added on the front page of the article to this effect. The editor also notified journal B of their decision.

The editor considers the case closed.

18-15 Peer reviewer contacted by author

In a single blind peer review process, a reviewer gave an author detailed suggestions about improvements in the statistical analysis. The author was asked to revise and resubmit the paper to address these and other reviewers' suggestions. The author, unaware of the reviewer's identity, subsequently approached the reviewer as a respected colleague at a professional meeting to discuss the manuscript revision. During this conversation, to avoid having to pretend to go over their own suggestions as if they were from someone else, the reviewer disclosed that they were one of the reviewers. The author and reviewer discussed how to improve the manuscript, and at this point, the reviewer offered to assist with new statistical analyses they had recommended and become a co-author, which was agreeable to the author.

Before proceeding, the reviewer disclosed this interaction and her intention to the journal editors and the associate editor handling the paper. We determined to reject the manuscript because of the breach of confidentiality and the conflict of interest between the reviewer's role as reviewer and proposed role as co-author. They will presumably submit the co-authored paper to another journal.

Although the proposed transition from peer reviewer to co-author is clearly inappropriate, some of the early steps leading up to this are less clear. COPE guidance for peer reviewers (<https://publicationethics.org/files/Peer%20review%20guidelines.pdf>) recommends that reviewers not contact the authors directly without the permission of the journal but provides no guidance about how to handle a situation in which an author, in good faith, approaches the reviewer. This may be particularly common in smaller scientific communities.

Question(s) for the COPE Forum

- Does the reviewer have an obligation to conceal their status when asked by the author?
- Alternately, would it be better to acknowledge their status as a reviewer but decline to comment further?

- How should a reviewer handle having an author unknowingly approach them to discuss a manuscript?

Advice

Does the journal have instructions for their reviewers regarding revealing their identity? Should this be up to reviewers to decide? The Forum felt this was an unusual case and there does not appear to be any guidance available on this issue. The Forum questioned whether it was fair on the part of the reviewer to have to conceal their identity and go along with the pretence and is perhaps unrealistic in an academic environment.

What we want to encourage is transparency in the peer review process. Ideally the reviewer should have contacted the journal to discuss the situation. However, it seems a harsh decision to reject the article because of an inadvertent scientific interaction between researchers and colleagues. If the reviewer had contacted the journal, he/she could have recused themselves from the review process and an independent reviewer been invited to review the paper. Any subsequent revision that included the reviewer as a new author could have been properly scrutinised and put through the peer review process.

Follow-up

The editors wrote back to the authors to offer the opportunity to resubmit the manuscript with the involved reviewer now as a co-author, after which it would receive new independent review. However, the authors had already sent it elsewhere.

The editors consider the case closed.

18-17 Victim of article theft wants correction to list their name, not retraction

Author A contacted us claiming that an article published in the journal recently by author B was stolen from an article author A had earlier submitted to two different publishers, publisher A in 2016 and publisher B in 2017. Author A provided the PDFs of the manuscripts they had submitted to those other publishers. The version submitted to us 2018 by author B was very similar to that submitted to publisher B.

We contacted publisher B who confirmed the details of the submission to them by author A in 2017. Author B is listed publicly as a reviewer for publisher B's journal, but publisher B could not confirm that they had direct access to this particular submission. Author B said their PhD advisor, now apparently deceased, had given them the article but they recently had doubts that this had been their advisor's work. They agreed to retraction.

Author A has asked whether instead of retracting we might publish a correction to replace author B with the rightful author, Author A, because the article has already been peer reviewed and accepted.

Question(s) for the COPE Forum

- Is correcting a stolen article to list the correct authors a potential solution? If so, should we correct the article metadata too?
- Is there any precedent for such a total correction of authorship?
- How might we detect and prevent the publication of stolen articles? They do not show up on CrossRef Similarity Check because they are unpublished.

Advice

Copyright is with the assigned author and it is not appropriate to simply transfer it to another author. The Forum advised that there are clear authorship guidelines from COPE and other organisations. There are real duties and responsibilities that come with authorship and hence it is not appropriate to just change the authorship list. The new author(s) have not been involved in the preparation of the article for publication (submitting, revising, etc) and the author(s) who stole the paper may have made changes to the paper. The editor may wish to direct the author to their authorship criteria and peer review process to explain why transferring authorship is not appropriate.

To prevent theft of a paper, one idea put forward was for the DOI to be reserved in advance, with the title and names of the authors, and then part of the CrossRef similarity check would extend to looking up the titles and authors in the DOI database to see if anything similar is already on file.

Follow-up

The journal is retracting the article and have reported this to the institution, who are investigating. The journal is discussing republishing the work with the legitimate authors.