



Forum agenda
Meeting to be held on Monday 24 July 2017
BY WEBINAR

At 4pm–5.30pm (British Summer Time)

1. Update on COPE activities by the Chair

2. Forum discussion: Preprints: what are the issues?

3. New cases

17-11 Authorship dispute unsatisfactorily resolved by institution (JM)

17-12 Potential figure manipulation with corresponding author uncontactable (JM)

17-13 Unhelpful institution report (SS)

17-14 Withdrawal request by an author (LS)

4. Updates

17-09 Lead author of a research paper disagrees with content of a linked editorial

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2. FORUM DISCUSSION: Preprints: what are the issues?

<https://publicationethics.org/forum-discussion-topic-comments-please-8>

Preprints and working papers have been posted and shared for many years. They report research results that have not undergone peer review, although in many cases the authors also submit to a journal (before, after or at the same time as making a preprint available). In the past 5 years, the number of preprint servers and preprints has expanded and new disciplines, notably biology and life sciences, have seen rapid growth in the number of preprints. Preprints appear in a number of contexts, including dedicated preprint servers (of which arXiv is by far the largest), social media and networking sites (e.g. Researchgate), and institutional repositories. Standards, pre-online checks and policies vary between platforms and there are currently no established standards, although [ASAPbio](#) will convene a meeting in July in which the establishment of standards will be among the issues discussed.

To date there have been few public discussions around the ethics of making unverified research available in this way and there are a number of issues that arise. Not all ethical issues around preprints have a link with journal articles and COPE may wish to consider 'mission creep' and whether all aspects of preprints ethics fall within its remit.

A few important issues for COPE to discuss are the following:

Citation – Can and should a preprint establish precedence for reporting research results? Should authors of journal articles be expected to include relevant preprints when reviewing the literature? Preprints are typically not included in regular indexing services, so are less visible than journal articles and more likely to be overlooked by authors.

Withdrawal/retraction and correction/updating preprints – Under what circumstances should a preprint be retracted or updated and whose responsibility is it to make such a decision, given that there is typically no expert editor associated with a preprint? If a journal version of a preprint is retracted, should the preprint also be removed or marked in some way? If a preprint is withdrawn should a reason for the removal be given? Since they have not been peer reviewed, preprints should be used with care by readers, however it is not clear whether there is a threshold at which leaving an inaccurate preprint online could be considered damaging and misleading.

Ethical approval – Could authors take advantage of preprint servers that have minimal checks to circumvent ethical requirements, e.g. for clinical trials? What recommendations can be made to those running preprint servers regarding ethical policies?

Journal editors – Many journals will consider papers that have been posted as preprints, although some do not have a clear policy. Are there any special considerations for papers that have already appeared as a preprint? For example:

- Consideration of online comments/reviews especially where they identify weaknesses of the paper;
- Verification that a previously posted version of a paper has not been peer reviewed;
- Whether to consider a submitted paper that reports results already included in a preprint with different authors.

Further reading

ASAPbio Draft statement 2: journal policies regarding pre-posting of articles: <http://asapbio.org/drafts/draft2>.

Retraction/removal policies from several preprint servers:

- ArXiv <https://arxiv.org/help/withdraw>
- BiorXiv <http://www.biorxiv.org/about/FAQ>
- PeerJ Preprints <https://peerj.com/about/preprints/policies-and-procedures/#retraction-policy>
- Preprints.org https://www.preprints.org/instructions_for_authors#withdrawal

This will be discussed at the start of the next COPE Forum on Monday 24 July 2017. Please do leave any comments (<https://publicationethics.org/forum-discussion-topic-comments-please-8>), whether or not you are planning on joining the meeting

3. NEW CASES

17-11 Authorship dispute unsatisfactorily resolved by institution

The journal was contacted with a claim to first authorship of a paper currently published online ahead of print. Print publication was put on hold pending the result of the investigation. The claim to first authorship was based on the claimant stating that they had obtained most results published in the paper during their PhD studies under the supervision of the corresponding author, and contributed to the writing of the text. The claimant provided evidence of this in the form of screenshots of a submission confirmation email and subsequent rejection email from another journal for a manuscript with a similar title, a Word document labelled as the claimant's PhD thesis and details of overlap with the published paper, and a screenshot of an email reported to have been sent by the claimant to the corresponding author in 2013 containing images used in the published paper.

The corresponding author was contacted and declared on behalf of all authors that the claimant had not contributed to the experiments or writing, and that none of the results shown in the article were performed by the claimant. They explained that the claimant was discharged from the PhD programme before successful completion. The claimant indicated that they wished to dispute this, and the institution was asked to investigate and resolve the dispute.

The institution informed the journal that the knowledge generated during state funded projects was the property of the institution, and only the institution has the ability to agree a copyright transfer in agreement with the corresponding author, and that the corresponding author had full legal and institutional support to determine the author list of papers resulting from the project. They stated that a graduate student may or may not be included as an author on papers deriving from projects to which they have contributed, and according to institutional guidelines, in order to be included as an author, a student must successfully complete their studies within a defined timeframe. The decision to remove the claimant as a co-author was confirmed to have been made because they were dismissed from the graduate programme before successful completion.

The institution did not comment on the extent of the contribution of the claimant to the research results and discussion presented in the published paper. The journal considers that ICMJE/COPE guidelines do not hold non-completion of studies as a valid reason for disqualification from authorship..

Question(s) for the COPE Forum

- Should the journal operate according to ICMJE/COPE guidelines for determining authorship in the face of contradictory institutional authorship criteria and against the wishes of the corresponding author and institution?
- If so, how can the right to authorship of the claimant according to ICMJE/COPE guidelines be now confirmed independently of the institution?
- If a copyright transfer has already been agreed between the publisher and the institution/corresponding author, is this agreement affected if a separate correction article is published detailing an authorship change?

17-12 Potential figure manipulation with corresponding author uncontactable

A reader contacted the journal to raise concerns about a paper containing a potentially manipulated figure. The editor-in-chief agreed with the assessment that the figure had been manipulated and attempted to contact the corresponding author, without response. Following further contact with the co-authors and institution, it was established that the corresponding author had retired after publication of the paper, and no current contact details could be found.

No co-authors were able to confirm how the figure was constructed, but explained that it was an old image that was made by or for the corresponding author, and that the location of the raw image or original data was not known due to the corresponding author's laboratory being dismantled on retirement. The figure is also present in a previous publication from 2007. The figure manipulation does not appear to affect the scientific results or conclusions of the paper.

Question(s) for the COPE Forum

- Given that the corresponding author cannot be contacted to confirm if the nature of any figure manipulation merits retraction, would it be appropriate to publish an expression of concern which will remain in place if no additional information is forthcoming?

17-13 Unhelpful institution report

An allegation of data fraud was not satisfactorily resolved by correspondence with the authors. We then went to the lead institution and asked for an investigation. Within 10 days we had a report clearing the authors, but interestingly using some of the exact same phrases the authors used in their responses to us. We felt that the report was too superficial and approached the other institution involved.

A new investigation was started; this investigation took many months. The report said there was insufficient justification to take the matter to formal assessment and the institution was not minded to investigate further.

We remain concerned. The second investigation asked the authors to provide some data for re-analysis: that came out close enough for the committee to be reassured. However, provision of the same data for re-analysis is likely to produce the same result. In our previous experiences, only checking of at least some of the case report forms would uncover fraudulent data. We are therefore not reassured that the paper is sound and we have no direct evidence (CRFs) that the data are genuine.

Question(s) for the COPE Forum

- When two institutional reviews have failed to investigate thoroughly enough to reassure editors, what further investigations might be warranted? And by whom?
- Is there sufficient doubt remaining for an Expression of Concern? Or should we accept the results of the investigations even if we consider them inadequate?

17-14 Withdrawal request by an author

We received a request by an author who states not to have contributed to an article published in 2015. The author claims that his name was used without his knowledge and that the corresponding author has been retired for several years and can no longer be reached. At the time of submission, we received a copyright transfer signed with the author's name (we request all authors to sign the form). We are not in favour of withdrawing the article as we feel we have a signed copyright form.

Question(s) for the COPE Forum

- How should we reply to the author requesting withdrawal of the paper?
- We believe a copyright transfer form signed by all author has legal value for us: is this the case?

4. UPDATES

17-09 Lead author of a research paper disagrees with content of a linked editorial

Case text (anonymised)

The author of an accepted research paper (that showed some benefits for a controversial treatment) contacted the journal shortly prior to publication of the paper. It is the policy of our journal not to share commissioned editorials with authors ahead of time. This author had, however, received a copy of the journal press release in preparation for a press briefing. The press release quoted statements from a commissioned accompanying editorial that concluded that "a clinically useful effect [for the treatment] remains uncertain..." and pointed out some shortcomings of the paper.

The author contacted the editorialist directly to obtain the full text of the editorial, and complained to the editorialist and the journal about its content. The editorial was revised to take some but not all of his complaints into account. The author requested that he be allowed to read the revised editorial and suggested that it should be sent for peer review. These requests were refused.

However, at a press briefing just prior to publication, the authors saw a final version of the revised editorial. They contacted the journal and indicated they were dissatisfied with the revised editorial. They asked to have a lengthy letter rebutting the editorial posted online simultaneously with publication of the editorial.

They were directed to follow normal procedures for posting a response to a paper, which includes waiting until it is published and adhering to other standard procedures for commentary on a published paper. The authors were not satisfied with this suggestion. After negotiation, a compromise was reached which allowed posting of a longer than usual letter the morning after the editorial went online

Question(s) for the COPE Forum

- Does the Forum think it is good practice to share the content of linked editorials with the authors of the relevant paper? Should the journal change its long-standing policy not to share?
- What is the Forum's view on whether commissioned editorials should be sent for peer review? If not routinely, then should that have been done in this case?
- How should the journal respond to the behaviour of the lead author? Contacting the editorialist directly to obtain a copy of the editorial, and corresponding with that person directly over the holidays, is not typical behaviour and clearly made the editorialist feel uncomfortable.
- The journal declined to publish the authors' rapid response alongside the editorial when it went online. The journal decided that the authors should go through the usual process of posting a rapid response to the editorial after publication, and that it should be vetted in the usual way. Was this the right decision?
- Should the journal have allowed the editorial authors to see this very critical rapid response before publication, so they had the chance to respond quickly?

Advice:

The Forum suggested that journals do have a journalistic role—they commission editorials—and hence have a right to voice their view. However, it is important to manage expectations, to ensure all parties are aware of the situation and the process for linked editorials, and to treat everyone the same. For example, were the authors aware they might have a commissioned editorial on their paper and that this would not be shared with them before publication? It can be alarming for authors if they do not know there is going to be a press release related to their article, especially as the author contact details are often in the press release so that they can be contacted for interview by the media. If it is a third party issuing the press release, there is little the journal can do. For high profile research, with extracts from the paper leaked, it can provide an opportunity for the author to influence process. In these situations, the journal can only manage expectations in relation to its own journal processes.

The Forum agreed it is fine for authors to have the right of reply post publication (via comments/rapid response) if that is made clear in the journal policies, and as long as the editorial is appropriate and fair. Some journals limit communication to one round of exchanges only, published online or in print.

If it is a straightforward commentary, it should not need to be peer-reviewed. Standard practice is not to peer review commentaries. Several Forum members stated that standard practice in their journal was for authors not to see linked editorials or commentaries, although authors are informed there is a linked commentary to their article. Informing authors is important, especially if there is a delay in publication or if the two articles are published simultaneously.

If a journal thinks an editorial might be controversial, the editor should consider having it peer-reviewed. Many journals have provenance statements, indicating whether or not an article has been peer-reviewed. The editorial can be peer-reviewed by the reviewers of the original article, or it may be appropriate to use different reviewers if the piece is very critical of the original article.

In summary, the editors should manage the expectations of the authors by having guidelines in place for their process of issuing press releases and how they alert authors, along with their policies for handling post publication commentaries. The process needs to be very clear so that the authors are not taken unawares

Follow-up

We discussed the matter with our internal ethics committee who were supportive of the journal's approach to linked editorials—specifically, they agreed that the journal should not share them before publication. We have now started writing to the authors of papers scheduled for press release, explaining why we do not share, and asking them not to contact editorialists directly. Our press officer has agreed not to put links to editorials in the press release sent to paper authors for approval. The link goes back in before release to journalists.

We have been sending authors these letters for several months, and the editorials' editors have commented that "most authors seem appreciative".

The editor considers the case closed.