

COPE consultation/guidance document on handling competing interests

Aim

The aim of this document is to encourage discussion and to capture a record of the issues around competing interests, especially when they arise after publication, to help inform and progress the debate, and to firm-up guidance where that is indicated. Please comment.

Introduction

Competing interests (also known as conflicts of interests (COIs)) are ubiquitous. One definition is as follows

“A conflict of interest (COI) is a situation in which a person or organization is involved in multiple interests, financial interest, or otherwise, one of which could possibly corrupt the motivation of the individual or organization. The presence of a conflict of interest is independent of the occurrence of impropriety.”[1]

Publishers have interpreted competing interests in a number of ways: one example is from the PLOS journals [2] “A competing interest is anything that interferes with, or could reasonably be perceived as interfering with, the full and objective presentation, peer review, editorial decision-making, or publication of research or non-research articles submitted to a journal. Competing interests can be financial or non-financial, professional, or personal. Competing interests can arise in relationship to an organization or another person.” We welcome other examples.

It is also useful to note that competing interests may arise in the conduct of research itself, and in the context of publishing are thus not restricted to the presentation, peer review, decision making or publication of articles in journals.

These generally understood principles are shared by many journals and publishers. Their interpretation into policy, however, varies (eg, journals ask for a variety of levels of disclosure for financial competing interests).

Issues that have arisen

Competing interests are a regular topic at the [COPE Forum](#). In particular, we have seen a number of cases recently in which competing interests have come to light after publication and where editors have been unwilling, or uncertain of the process, to issue a correction.

This discussion document lays out the policy again, and clarifies processes for handling competing interests, especially if they arise after publication. In particular, it is worth noting that correcting the record in this way should be regarded as a positive step by a journal.

Clarification of policy

COPE’s [Code of Conduct](#) item 17 clearly states that “Editors should have systems for managing their own conflicts of interest as well as those of their staff, authors, reviewers and editorial board members.” The intention of the policy is in line with increasing moves across all of scholarly publishing to increase transparency for all aspects of reporting. In addition, it has a specific aim in the context of publication ethics as competing interests can threaten the integrity of the work being reported.

Practical issues for handling competing interests

1. Ideally, issues relating to competing interests should be handled before publication (ie, during the review process of the journal). Hence, the first and most important issue is that journals and publishers should have a clear process in place, and that it is clearly and regularly articulated to authors, reviewers, editors and journal staff.
2. Competing interests' declarations should ideally be a separate step in the submission or review process, with clear explanations and examples.
3. The competing interest policy should be appropriately managed. This is most appropriately done by senior staff at the journal and/or publisher.
4. Journals and publishers should have a process in place for handling the reporting of competing interests come to light during the publication process—for example from reviewers. The process is laid out in [this flowchart](#).
5. Journals and publishers should have a process in place for handling the reporting of competing interests come to light after publication. The process is laid out in [this flowchart](#). On occasion, these reports may come from anonymous individuals, for which [guidelines are available](#).
6. It is most important that when a previously undeclared competing interest has been found, the journal ensures it is appropriately documented on the published manuscript, with linking to the version of record—for example, a letter to the editor is not generally sufficient.
7. When a previously undeclared competing interest comes to light, journals may wish to review and if necessary make their policy stronger or clearer.

We encourage feedback on this consultation document, in particular if there are practical obstacles that journals or publishers have encountered in handling competing interests.

1. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conflict_of_interest
2. <http://journals.plos.org/plosone/s/competing-interests>

COMMENTS FROM THE FORUM (Wednesday 9 December 2015) – NOTE, Comments do not imply formal COPE advice, or consensus.

- This document is a good idea. It is very helpful to have the issues laid out clearly.
- Among the complaints that COPE has received from readers and authors against members, many have been related to CoIs, with authors complaining that a journal has not taken the issue seriously and does not understand that it is necessary for an erratum to be posted if a CoI needs to be declared or amended.
- Adding practical examples or common scenarios for editors (similar to the COPE discussion document on ‘What constitutes authorship?’) would be useful, along with examples of the wording of errata.
- Editors should always declare their own CoIs every time they publish in their own journal, particularly if it is a research paper rather than an editorial. When editors publish in their own journal, the handling editor or external editor could be listed so the process is transparent and it is clear who was involved in the review process. Should we restrict the number of papers editors can publish in their own journal?
- One way of promoting transparency, especially when dealing with papers from inhouse staff or the editor, is to include a provenance statement on articles, stating whether the paper was commissioned or spontaneously submitted and whether or not it was externally reviewed.

- A poll of the Forum audience revealed that at least a third of the audience have had a complaint concerning a CoI after publication, and a few have had anonymous complaints.
- It can be very difficult for someone to judge their own CoIs accurately—if in doubt, it is best to declare your CoI.
- CoIs can be very complex and can be difficult to establish if authors move jobs. This is an issue for systematic reviews, which may then be updated, and the authors may have outdated or undisclosed CoIs.
- CoIs can be very lengthy and complex, and it is fine to have an abbreviated CoI on the paper with a link to the full declaration elsewhere.
- Can COPE provide more guidance on what is a CoI? What is the difference between a funding statement and a CoI statement? A CoI can also arise from non-commercial sources. Authors are often confused about what they need to declare.
- ‘In-kind support’, such as administrative assistance, literature searching support, medical writing support or providing a reagent, should be disclosed, in simple detail, to provide transparency.
- Authors need help in declaring CoIs. Sometimes authors ‘over disclose’ and some CoIs are not relevant, so it is important to establish the pertinent CoIs.
- As well as the need to distinguish between financial and non-financial CoIs, we need to be clear about what is a direct CoI relevant to the paper under consideration.

In summary,

- It is essential that journals and editors have a process to handle CoIs that come to light after publication.
- CoIs can be complex and sometimes lengthy.
- If we believe CoI are important to declare before publication, then it follows that if they come to light after publication it is very important to correct the literature by publishing an erratum or some form of comment in a way that links it permanently to the published article.

ACTION: COPE will review all of the comments and revise the discussion document accordingly. The revised document will then be posted on the website for further comments.

COMMENTS POSTED ON THE WEBSITE

Posted by Angela Webster, 3/12/2015

I find the flowchart helpful—but it assumes an allegation of COI is substantiated. Most situations I have encountered are not clear cut. Apparent COI may not, on investigation, be as alleged. Could the flowchart reflect less clear cut situations?

Posted by Allison Worden, 8/12/2015

Our journal specializes in review articles, some of which are supported by both direct funding and in-kind support, which the authors would like to acknowledge. This can lead to lengthy declarations that are not always easy to accommodate given the journal's page budget for the print edition. In such cases, would COPE find it acceptable to publish an abbreviated CoI in the article that directs readers to a more complete CoI in a Supporting Information file? Some of our authors also work on committees that are supported by industry funding or prepare articles stemming from conference presentations or workshops that received commercial sponsorship. While direct funding of research activities and receipt of a speaker honorarium are clearly understood to be deserving of declaration, how far does the interpretation of

"funding" extend and how directly does the funding need to be connected to the authors' work to warrant declaration? Does "funding" also cover in-kind support such as administrative assistance or provision of data or materials, or should in-kind support be noted as a standard acknowledgment rather than a CoI?

Posted by Michael Wise, 9/12/2015

The COPE flowcharts and much of the thinking behind the Discussion brief is in terms of undisclosed Conflicts of Interest. However, another layer to this is what to do about disclosed Conflicts of Interest when they appear problematic. Disclosure is good for clarity, but does not necessarily make the problem go away; we now notice that the elephant in the room has pink toenails.

Posted by Chris Graf 9/12/2015

Above, COPE says it "welcome[s] other examples". Here's what we say in the Wiley ethics guidelines. This reflects (and quotes) other guidance (including that from COPE). So it is derivative and supportive of the "community standards" that we were aware of at the time of writing, rather than breaking new ground. <http://exchanges.wiley.com/ethicsguidelines#subSection6.7>