The Ethical Editor

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Journal editors have a fundamental responsibility to publish accurate information. When the integrity of a published paper is called into question, editors have a responsibility to correct the literature. In some cases, a full or partial retraction may not be warranted, but a typical correction may not go far enough. In these intermediate situations, a valuable but less known option is available: the “expression of concern”.

Preliminary Considerations

When faced with a situation that may warrant action of any type, editors should first ask themselves a number of questions (see the White Paper, pages 61–62):

1. What is the nature of the situation?
2. Who is bringing the situation to the editor’s attention?
3. Who will be notifying the journal’s readership, and what wording should be used?
4. Is the timing of the notice’s publication important?
5. What is the timing of the original publication?

Remember, a formal “statute of limitations” does not exist in regard to scientific misconduct. If there is a problem with a paper, think about what the reader is owed—even if the original paper is 10 years old and has been cited 100 times. Sometimes there is no obvious right answer; but the more information gathered, the better informed the decision will be. In some situations, seeking legal counsel might be advisable.

Expressions of Concern

“Expressions of concern”, introduced by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors, can be used to draw attention to concerns about a study in cases in which retraction is not (or not yet) warranted. There are many possible reasons for an alert of this kind. For example, university investigations into alleged research misconduct can often take a long time, as can investigations by the US Office of Research Integrity or comparable agencies in other countries. In some cases, an investigation might not take place at all despite requests from journal editors. Alternatively, an editor may receive notification from a university that a particular lead author is under investigation, thus raising a question about his or her previously published manuscripts. (Other examples of situations that may warrant an expression of concern can be found on pages 67–69 of the White Paper.)

Every situation is different, and when deciding to publish an expression of concern, an editor must weigh carefully the potential damage to an author’s reputation against the editor’s obligation to his or her readership. If the suspected misconduct, if true, would render a study scientifically invalid or nonreproducible or would affect its conclusions drastically, the editor should inform the readership via an expression of concern. Such an expression should outline the grounds for concern and specify the investigating university or agency (if any). If the suspected misconduct is under investigation, the editor should assure readers that they will be informed about the investigation’s outcome. In cases that are investigated, the expression of concern should eventually be followed by a retraction (if that is what the situation warrants), a simple correction, or an update informing the readers that the investigation has been completed and no wrong doing was found. In cases that are not investigated, the expression of concern might always be with that article, with no clear resolution, but at least the editor has informed the readership of potential concerns (that is, buyer beware).

Other Mechanisms for Communication

In addition to retractions (full or partial), corrections, and expressions of concern, journals can offer other mechanisms to qualify and even correct scholarly communication. Some journals offer forums that allow researchers the opportunity to...
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challenge results, interpretations, or conclusions of a published paper and that may be accompanied by a response from the authors of the original paper. Unlike traditional letters to the editor, these forums are often peer reviewed. Contributions to the “Technical Comments” section in Science, for example, can be up to 1000 words long with 15 references and two figures or tables; typically, each comment is accompanied by a formal response from the original study’s authors. Cell uses its “Matters Arising” section to air major challenges to its published studies. (For other examples, see pages 62–63 in the White Paper.)

Some journals are offering online forums or “eLetters” in which readers can comment on articles and an editor can moderate the discussion (or not). Such options allow continued scholarly discourse about research that is published in the journal, and methods of implementation may vary. Gøtzsche et al discuss some of the experiences of the BMJ with “eLetters” in “Adequacy of authors’ replies to criticism raised in electronic letters to the editor: cohort study”, available online at http://www.bmj.com/content/341/bmj.c3926.full.3

Conclusion

Section 3.5 of CSE’s White Paper (“Correcting the Literature”, pages 56–69), offers many useful examples of types of literature corrections organized by the submitting party—such as corrections submitted by authors, retractions submitted by authors, and retractions submitted by editors (even when the lead author disagrees)—and examples of expressions of concern. Other recommended resources can be found by searching MEDLINE and consulting the National Library of Medicine fact sheet.1

Whatever final course of action you take as an editor, be sure that the situation receives your due diligence. It will require time and thought, but the benefits—for your readers and the scientific community as a whole—will be well worth your investment.

References


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