

COPE Annual Seminar 2007: “How Can Editors and Publishers Encourage Ethical Behaviour and Transparency?”

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In its 10th year and soon to be seeking charitable status, COPE (the Committee on Publication Ethics) held its annual seminar in London on 16 March 2007.

Global representation included India, the United States, and the presence of television cameras from South Korea, a country now infamous in scientific integrity after Hwang Woo-suk's fraudulent stem-cell paper.¹ The country's broadcasting association was gathering material for a 60-minute documentary on research ethics.

Image Manipulation

Mike Rossner, managing editor of the *Journal of Cell Biology (JCB)* and director of the Rockefeller University Press, sought to amuse and inform with his opening lecture on image manipulation.

Satirical image adjustment in the mainstream media is approaching saturation and even acceptability, but manipulation in published research tarnishes the scientific record and integrity, although, as Rossner suggested, it is commonplace in scientific research. *JCB*, which has dealt with one to two cases of potentially fraudulent figures per week in the last 5 years, is seemingly leading the field on addressing image manipulation. The journal has produced detailed guidelines on dealing with cases, which are of two distinct types: inappropriate manipulation, which does not affect the interpretation of the data, and fraudulent manipulation, which does and which at *JCB* leads to revocation of accepted articles.

What is surprising—even paradoxical—is

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that *JCB* does not report image manipulation to an author's institution unless there is an Editorial Board contact available that the journal “knows and trusts”. It also does not report to the US Office of Research Integrity. In his response to a comment from the floor, Rossner argued that the journal does not want to bring action against a principal investigator without being confident that the complaint would be properly investigated. Indeed, Rossner noted that an article rejected by *JCB* on grounds of fraudulent manipulation has been published elsewhere; the journal's editors found no fault and simply argued “difference of opinion”.

With actions clearly speaking louder than words, Rossner's take-home message was that if guidelines were prepared, they should be enforced.

Authorship

Transparency and authorship were the focus of the second session, led by Ana Marusic, an editor-in-chief of the *Croatian Medical Journal (CMJ)*.

What constitutes authorship appears to be an unsolved riddle in scientific publishing; COPE notes in its own guidelines² that there is no universal agreement on the subject.

Following a debate with her husband, and fellow *CMJ* editor-in-chief, on defining authorship, Marusic and colleagues have conducted research³ on the influence of disclosure format on deserved authorship. In their randomized study of manuscripts submitted to *CMJ*, Marusic et al found that self-reports of authorship follow the rules of survey psychometrics. Closed-ended questions are more likely to result in a “socially desirable” response. Supporting her argument with related research published in several other journals,^{4,6} Marusic

proposed that the question of who should be a deserving author of a scientific article is too important to be resolved on the grounds of an inadequately designed self-report. Ironically, however, until universal authorship guidelines can be proposed, Marusic concluded that editors should ask all authors a simple, open-ended question: “Why do you think you deserve to be the author of this manuscript?”

Plagiarism Detection

The detection of plagiarism theoretically and in practice was under discussion in the sessions that followed.

Fintan Culwin, professor of software engineering education at London South Bank University, described how we are now able to detect “nonoriginality”—editors must decide what constitutes the “P” word—chiefly via TurnItIn or Google.

Current technology allows for the production of, for example, color-coded reports when submitted work is compared with a corpus of documents on file for more rapid detection. Apparently, this is especially useful for checking undergraduate theses, which have been found to be up to 60% nonoriginal in some cases.

Sunil Moreker, editor of the *Bombay Ophthalmology Journal* and member of the Committee for Plagiarism Detection, described the applications of plagiarism-detection software. He explained how the prevalence of plagiarism depends on which of the limited choices of available research is consulted. On the basis of his experience, he put the extent of the problem at perhaps 25% to 30% of manuscripts.

Moreker argued that plagiarism-detection software should be applied to all manuscripts. In one case, a manuscript was retrospectively found to be 100% nonoriginal; only the title had been altered. But he

conceded that when a “big fish” becomes embroiled in allegations, it invariably leads to complications.

Comments from the floor included those of Iain Chalmers, of the COPE Education Committee, who highlighted what can be perceived as acceptable and unacceptable forms of self-plagiarism.

Culwin also reminded the audience that the ability to detect plagiarism depends on the scope of the corpus. Accessibility of data is therefore a key to detecting plagiarism—a conclusion that the numerous representatives of the open-access publisher BioMed Central were undoubtedly happy to draw.

More Guidelines

Speaking for Blackwell, the only commercial publisher presenting at the meeting, Chris Graf had some good news. The delegates were unanimous in agreeing that publishers could do more to help to improve ethical standards; by no coincidence, Graf announced that Blackwell has prepared its own set of guidelines⁷ on publication ethics. The guidelines are freely available to all via the Internet and have received substantial praise from editors, although Blackwell will not provide

specific advice to editors working for other publishers. Graf later admitted that as a for-profit publisher, it does have broader motives: the production of such guidelines could well lead to a reduction in insurance premiums. Among others, COPE Treasurer Jeremy Theobald highlighted this conflict and went further: he suggested that the commercial interests of publishers actually prevent editors from taking action.

As a prelude to the useful workshop on ethical cases and the annual general meeting that followed, COPE announced that it is changing. It finds itself in the enviable position of having £50,000 a year to spend and not knowing what to do with it. Suggestions from the floor included a traveling road show, an award for editorial innovation, and even a whistleblowers support group. On the basis of the enthusiasm for the day's event, whichever way COPE choose to evolve can only be for the benefit of ethical standards in scientific publishing. 

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